SECRET SOCIETIES

HIDDEN HISTORY OF THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR
THE CHURCH'S OLDEST CONSPIRACY
THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR
CONRAD BAUER
ON THE TRAIL OF THE TREASURE
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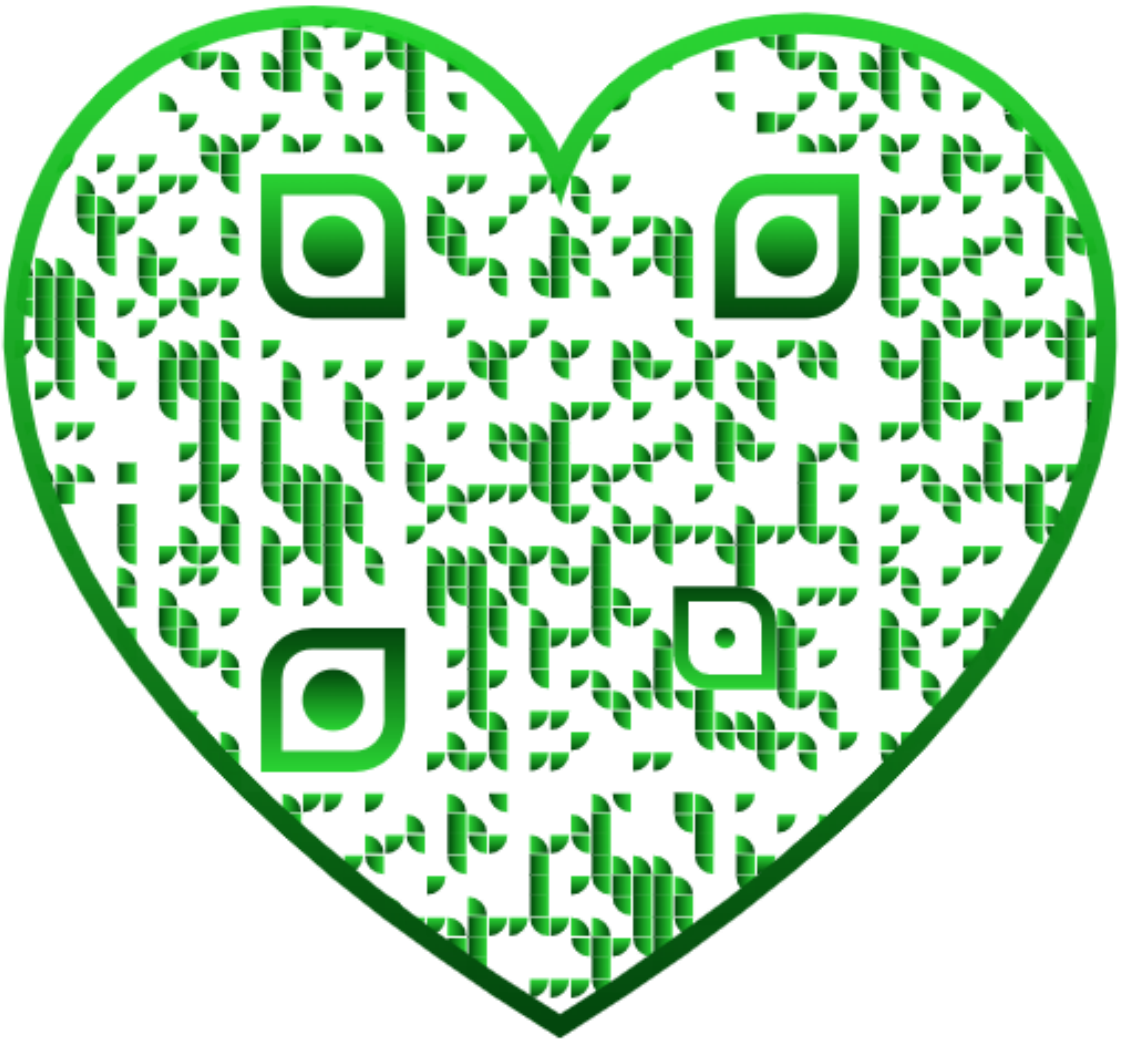

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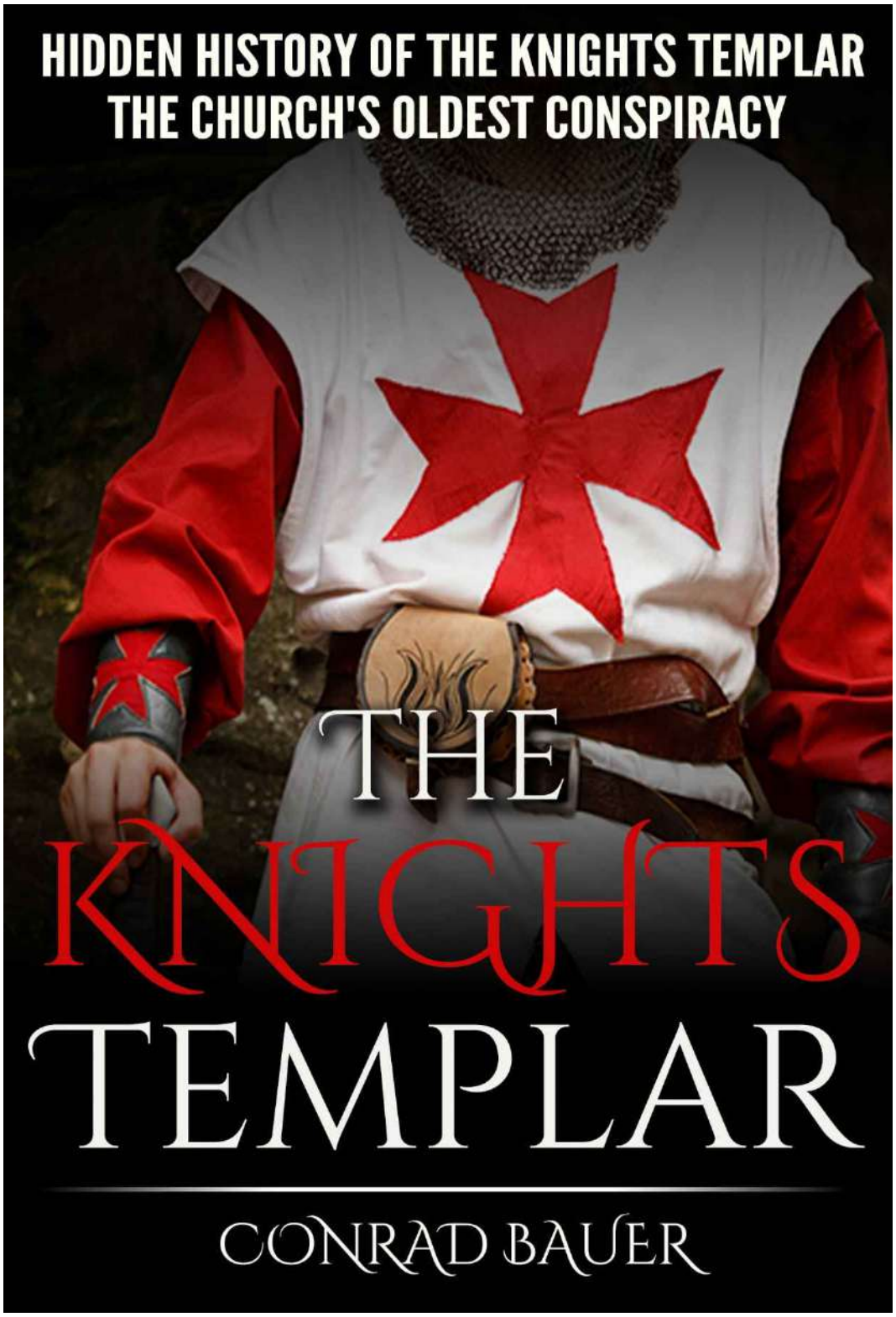
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Introduction

The Knights Templar existed officially for less than 200 years. Founded to protect pilgrims who were traveling through the Holy Lands, their rise to power was sudden. They became some of the most feared warriors in the region, they had a mandate from God, they controlled perhaps the world's first real banking system, and they waged war against anyone who tried to wrestle Christianity's holiest grounds from the control of the Catholic Church. Within their short lifespan, they quickly became one of the most powerful societies in Europe, if not the world.

But, just as they rose to power with relative speed, they fell from grace just as fast. Forged in the crucible of Middle Eastern conflict, their power was soon resented and feared. Before they could become even more powerful, the greatest nations in Europe and the Church turned on them. The once powerful Templars were hunted, caught, tortured, and eventually burned at the stake. According to their prosecutors, they were a devil-worshipping secret society who spat on the cross and plotted against the Pope. They were officially disbanded and their members treated with extreme contempt and prejudice.

Or so goes the official story. In this book, we will not only look into the official history of the Knights Templar, but will examine the various ways their influence and ideas have tunneled their way into the modern world. A group this powerful does not vanish overnight. Instead, their history has been linked to the Freemasons, to vicious curses, to the butchery of the Crusades, and even to Christian relics such as the Holy Grail. For many people, the Templars did not vanish and they did not relinquish their tight grip on the power structures of medieval Europe. Instead, they went underground. Read on to discover the dark and twisted secret history of the Knights Templar.

The Savagery of the First Crusade

It is important to understand the context in which the Knights Templar were founded. Their formation was not as simple as a group of knights agreeing to gather together under one banner. Instead, their order was forged in the midst of the violence, conflict, and religious turmoil that was the medieval Holy Land. Much like our world today, the Near East of the turn of the first century was not a calm place. For centuries, it had been the area from which many of the world's major religions had been formed. The three huge Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – were all born in the same area. Indeed, they share many of the same principles, historical figures, and even religious texts. With all three religions deriving from the same geographical location, the fight for supremacy in the region led to constant conflict.

To Western readers, this conflict is most familiar through the Crusades. From the Christian perspective, the Crusades were a series of military campaigns waged in the Near East and divinely sanctioned by the Catholic Church. At the time, Islam controlled much of the region and Christian pilgrims were struggling to find safe passage to the holy sites they wished to visit. Christianity was facing a major schism, as the collapse of the Roman Empire had led to divisions forming between the Western head of the Church in the Vatican in Rome and his Eastern equivalent in Byzantine (the city later known as Constantinople and eventually Istanbul.) According to historian Paul Everett Pierson, Pope Urban II not only saw the first campaign as a chance to protect Christians in the Holy Land, but as a chance to reunite the disparate branches of the Church back under his control.

Protection for Pilgrims

The first Crusade was prompted by a letter sent from the Byzantine Emperor Alexios I in 1095. Alexios begged the Pope for assistance, knowing that the head of the Church might be able to rally an army in order

to protect the citizens from around the world who were attempting to make the journey to holy sites in cities such as Jerusalem as these citizens were often finding themselves in trouble. Though the Muslim rulers in Palestine and throughout the Holy Land nominally allowed for Catholic pilgrims to journey through their lands without an issue, this was not always the reality. The crimes supposedly committed by the Muslim rulers in the Holy Land were violent, vicious, and offensive to Christian sensibilities. These included suggestions that the Turks who controlled the area had ravaged the churches belonging to Christians in the region, that they had captured the city of Christ (Jerusalem) and had blasphemed against it by selling the Christian institutions (government offices, shops, merchants, tax offices, etc.) into abominable slavery, and that they had been harassing, bullying, and even committing acts of violence against the good Christians who simply wished to journey to the land of their savior.

As with many proclamations calling for violence and war, however, these claims were likely exaggerated. Emperor Alexios was himself facing a difficult reign, his Byzantine Empire having to disband their standing army following economic worries and the inflation of their currency. He needed help projecting power in the region, so turned to the place where his empire had traditionally been associated: Rome. He begged the Pope for assistance, for the military liberation of the region, and for help in turning back the wave of Muslim rule imposed by the conquering Turks.

In November of 1095, the Catholic Church held a conference to determine whether or not to assist Alexios. The Council of Clermont is documented in a number of different contemporary texts, by a number of writers who may have been present at the Council. The accounts do not tell the same story. Robert the Monk – who was present – suggests that Pope Urban decreed that it was God's will to intervene in the region. In return, Robert writes, the Pope promised absolution (forgiveness for mortal sins) to the men who would become crusaders. Other sources have suggested that the Pope instead offered an indulgence (an award that would reduce the punishment for any sins committed.) However, all of our accounts remember that the Pope focused more on the conquest of the Holy Lands, rather than providing assistance to the Byzantine Empire. It was agreed that the

mission would be put into motion on the 15th of August, a date important in the Catholic Church. Led by Adhemar of Le Puy, the first Crusade would set out on the same day as the Assumption of Mary.

Preparing for the Crusade

In a pre-Reformation Europe, the Catholic Church held a monopoly over religion. All Christian doctrine and its interpretation flowed through the corridors of Vatican City. While only a small district within the once-powerful city of Rome, the Vatican's power was on a similar level to that of France, Britain, and the other major countries. At the time, however, the Church had no standing army. If they were to launch a Crusade – a military campaign – then they would need soldiers. Not only would they need troops to fight, they would need men to lead. As such, Pope Urban issued his decree to the countries around Europe and requested that they send men of high and low birth to fight on behalf of the church. As well as the soldiers, a preacher named Peter the Hermit gathered together a group of 20,000 pilgrims and began the journey to the Holy Land.

But they did not travel far before they became embroiled in controversy and religious warfare. In 1096, as the 20,000 pilgrims passed through the Rhineland in Germany, they came across the cities of Worms, Speyer, Cologne, and Mainz. At the time, these cities had large Jewish communities. Such was the religious fervor of those embarking upon the First Crusade, that these Jewish communities presented an easy target for the mob's pent up wrath. As well as this, it was their first chance to practice their violence on a large scale. Bands of both knights and peasants who were traveling with the group became increasingly violent as they encountered Jewish communities. This violence included attempts at forced conversion, beatings, torture, and execution.

Perhaps the most violent of these early Crusader armies was the one lead by Count Emicho. Under his authority, a group of 10,000 Crusaders – both nobility and peasants – began to slaughter Jewish communities in large numbers. Though many of the local clergy objected – as did the Catholic

Church itself – there was little that could be done to stop the marauding bands of Crusaders. Communities of 800, 900, and even 1,000 were killed. Sources tell of one Jewish man who, after being forcibly converted to Christianity, was so overcome with the guilt of his actions that his killed his entire family and himself. One woman, hoping to escape the cruel violence of the Crusaders, killed her entire family before they could be subjected to the whims of the massed ranks. For historian David Nirenberg, the events of late 1096 planted the seeds of violent anti-Semitism which would eventually grow into the horrific slaughter of the Holocaust. The Rhineland massacres – as they came to be known – were an early indication of the kind of religious warfare promised by the Crusades.

Arriving in the Holy Land

The main army of the Crusaders was composed of French and Norman knights, backed up by soldiers from across Europe. They fought under the banner of the Church, with up to 100,000 men journeying to Byzantine to wage their war. Because they fought for a religious cause, the Church was able to offer them spiritual rewards. The importance of promises such as indulgences or absolution meant that not only would crimes committed during the Crusades be forgiven, but that sins already committed at home were less likely to deny the perpetrator entrance into the kingdom of heaven. For those who fervently believed in the Christian faith, this was a cause they could get behind.

Once the forces had gathered in modern-day Istanbul, the Crusade could begin in earnest. It was not a short campaign, lasting for many years. One of the first major conflicts came when the Crusaders tried to take the city of Antioch and laid siege to the city. Though the residents lasted almost a year behind the walls, they eventually fell to the Crusaders. Once inside, the Christians offered no quarter in their treatment of the Muslim population. They slaughtered them, soldiers and civilians both. The sacking of the city was so complete that a Muslim army was able to creep up on the Crusaders and lay siege to the city themselves. The Crusaders rallied their troops within Antioch and went out to meet the army being led by Muslim

commander Kerbogha. They triumphed and held on to the strategically important city.

The Battle for Jerusalem

From Antioch, the majority of the Crusader army marched south. Their goal – as it had been from the start – was to take the city in the name of Christianity. At the time, it was under Islamic control, but the city's population of Jews were able to live and practice their religion in relative peace. Even visiting Christian pilgrims were permitted to visit the holy sites and pray. This was not enough. Jerusalem was to be under Christian rule and the Crusaders would fight tooth and nail to wrest the city from their enemy's grasp.

Both the Muslims and Jews within Jerusalem fought long and hard against the Crusaders. But they would not hold out forever. On the 15th of July, 1099, the Christians took control of the city. What followed was a massacre. Much like at Antioch, the Crusaders pillaged the city. Anyone found to be a Muslim or a Jew was killed. Civilians were slaughtered en masse. The buildings that had been erected by Islamic architects were torn down, from mosques to other civil institutions. For one Crusader, Raymond D'Aguilers, the massacre was vindicated. He wrote a book titled 'Historia Francorum qui ceperunt Iherusalem,' in which he describes the Christians' entry into the city. His description of the Temple Mount suggests that the Crusaders' butchery was so great that blood rose to the knees of the men as they rode their horses.

Another source – Fulcher of Chartres – tells of 10,000 citizens being slaughtered, including women and children. Others report that the stench of the dead bodies was so great that they had to be carried beyond the city walls and left to rot outside. The funeral pyres, we are told, were so big they resembled pyramids. Only God alone could know the true number of men, women, and children killed that day.

Following the capture of Jerusalem, the Crusaders had control of four major cities in the Holy Land. These were Antioch, Tripoli, Edessa, and — the jewel in the crown — Jerusalem. For historians such as Riley Smith, however, the result of the First Crusade was not simply the territory now under Christian control, but the 'wave of pious, Catholic fury' which had been unleashed. The various massacres stretching from Germany to Jerusalem were indicative of the extent to which the Catholic Church's armies were able to use violence to achieve their goals.

After this campaign of violence, it seemed as though the Church had been at least partially successful. The Crusade had provided a banner under which Christians could unite and had exhibited the military power that the Church was able to project. For Christian pilgrims, passage to the Holy Land was now much safer. With Tripoli and Antioch both lying close to the Mediterranean Sea, the journey to Jerusalem could be conducted along Christian-held routes. But while protection for these pilgrims had initially been a goal, it had been supplanted in the name of control. Passage for Christians was not enough; now, they had to hold on to the Holy Lands.

Following a period of fearsome, church-backed violence, this was the world into which the Knights Templar would emerge. Already tainted by the violent butchery of the First Crusade, the blood of the massacres would linger over their formation and dictate their doctrine from their very first moments.

Formation

The Knights Templar were formed in a world of religiously motivated slaughter and butchery. It is perhaps fitting that an organization so embroiled in secrecy and rumor was founded at a time when trying to discern right from wrong, and fact from fiction, was so incredibly hard. When we look into the formation of the Knights Templar, it is difficult to tell the facts from the legend.

In 1099, following the capture of Jerusalem, it became more and more common for pilgrims to want to make the journey to the Holy Land. From all over Europe, those who were dedicated to the Christian faith (and those who could afford it) traveled from Britain, France, Germany, and other countries to visit the sites where Christ had lived and died. The First Crusade had been fought to restore this territory to the Catholic Church's control and they had succeeded in taking a number of important cities. But the land between the cities was not under their control. If anything, they had managed to make the environment even more hostile to the presence of Christians. Thanks to the bloodlust of the Crusaders, people across the Holy Land began to bear a grudge against them.

Bandits and highwaymen were regular threats to those pilgrims who sought to make the journey to the sacred sites. After the Crusaders had elevated the levels of violence in the region, there was little to prevent these locals from killing the Christians they came across, and these journeying Christians were sometimes killed in their hundreds. Despite one of the initial goals of the Crusade being to protect these travelers, they had failed. By the time 1119 rolled around, something needed to be done. Christian authority in the cities they controlled had been cemented enough that a king had been installed in Jerusalem – King Baldwin II – and a patriarch named Warmund assisted him.

Foundation of an Order

The idea of the Knights Templar was suggested by a French knight named Hughes de Payens. The proposal was for the creation of a dedicated, monastic group of knights who would use their military abilities to protect the Christians traveling from Jaffa to the interior sites of the Holy Land. The Church's support was not instant, but the Council of Nablus held in 1120 approved the idea. The Knights Templar was formed and King Baldwin II provided the order with their headquarters, located in one of the wings of the Royal Palace on Templar Mount. This was previously part of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, said to be built on the original site of King Solomon's temple and one of the places where the Crusaders had shed the most blood during their invasion of the city. This mystical location would forever be linked to the order.

The new collection of knights named themselves the 'Poor Knights of Christ and the Temple of Solomon.' This was often shortened to simply 'Templar Knights' or 'Templars.' At the beginning, there were nine members. As well as Hughes de Payens, Godfrey de Saint-Omer and Andre de Montbard would be important founding members, while their numbers also included Payne de Monteverdi, Archambaud de St. Agnan, and two other knights known simply as Gondamer and Rossal. One important bond shared by the founding members was that they were all related, whether by blood or marriage. To this day, we still do not know the identity of the final, ninth knight.

The Knights Templar, as a brand new order, found themselves with very little financial backing, hence the inclusion of 'poor' in their title. In order to really drive this point home, their emblem was drawn as two knights sharing a single horse. This impoverished, monastic existence would be a far cry from the Templar's later years.

Indeed, life in the early years of the Templars soon became anything but impoverished. One of the order's chief backers was a leading figure in the Catholic Church, named Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard was not only a powerful French abbot, but he was the nephew of Andre de Montbard. He backed the order from the very start, writing letters to other authority figures praising the new Knights Templar. With blessings like these, the

Templars soon gained a very valuable standing in the Church, becoming a favored charity. This formal endorsement from the religious figures of Europe meant that they were now able to receive donations of money, land, businesses, and other financial enterprises from backers throughout Christendom. As well as this, the order could take in the sons of noble families to swell their ranks. For aristocrats who wanted to help in the Crusades but did not want to take part themselves, a son could be dispatched to serve in the Knights Templar and it would be treated as a great honor.

Growing the Coffers

The growth of the Templars' coffers is one of the key factors that people point to when discussing the shadowy nature of the organization. During the first nine years of their existence, very little is known about the group. Despite the known presence of biographers and writers in the Holy Land – specifically in Jerusalem – at this time, they are notably absent from many of the primary sources we have from this time. This lack of evidence is taken by some people as being indicative of an active suppression of discussion about the Templars' activities. There is no doubt that the group was quickly noted for their importance, as they were permitted to house themselves in the Temple of Solomon, one of the holiest of sites in one of the holiest of cities in all of the Christian world. That they should not be present in histories and descriptions of the time, according to some, is evidence that their existence was not allowed to be discussed. This is a difficult theory to prove, however, and few historians or academics lend the idea much credence. However, as we begin to look through their history and notice their sudden accumulation of wealth, power, and reputation, we should consider why they went through such a notably fallow period during their early years.

During those first years, the Knights Templar remained largely silent. They faced criticism at first, including arguments from people who suggested that truly religious men would never be able to carry a sword. But their intentions and objectives were praised by various members of the clergy

and soon the arguments began to die down. One of the key defenses of the group involved the idea of a ‘just war,’ that is, a war intended to defend the Church from violence. Over time, the Templars began to resemble an order of warrior monks. Bernard of Clairvaux wrote in defense of the ‘fearless knight,’ whose soul would be protected by an ‘armor of faith,’ who would fear ‘neither demons nor men.’ From the outset, the Templars were permitted their use of violence in order to accomplish nominally Christian gains. Based in a temple noted for the Muslim bloodshed, with their violence ordained by the Church, the Templars’ numbers began to grow.

Their fame was also spreading throughout Europe. Their goal of defending the Christian faith against a Muslim invasion (however unlikely this was) was not only limited to the Holy Land. On hearing about the order, Portugal’s Countess Teresa promised the Templars Soure Castle in the south of the country. Soure was close enough to North Africa that the reigning European monarchy feared that they may be caught in a pincer movement, with Islam threatening Christianity on two fronts. Needless to say, the Templars took charge of the castle as a part of their burgeoning land holdings. Similar lands and finances were gained in 1131, when Count Ramon Bereguer III gave to the Templars his border stronghold named Granyena, near Barcelona. In 1134, they gained their biggest donation yet when King Alfonso I of Aragon died and bequeathed his kingdom to the order. Shortly after, they expanded their control over the Amanus March (the area surrounding Antioch) and were given lands in England. Templar-owned properties and fortifications were appearing all across Europe and the Near East.

Endorsement from the Pope

Another huge benefit came in 1139, when Pope Innocent II decreed that the Knights Templar were to be considered exempt from local laws. The rulings of the Church superseded local governance, so this allowed the Templars to pass from one country to another without needing permission, pay taxes, or bow to any authority other than the Pope, so this decree gave them a huge amount of power. Now, the Templars were almost an international

organization, able to move across Europe at their pleasure and work throughout Christendom in their mission to defend the pilgrims who were traveling to the Holy Land.

Throughout the early years of the order, some of the most important records we have of their existence relates to their trail of legal documents. Not only were the order being given properties throughout Europe, but they were beginning to make purchases themselves. We have documents from the period suggesting that the Knights Templar purchased property in 1122, 1123, 1125, and 1126, as well as many more in 1127 and 1128. These purchases were made possible thanks to donations, but it was not just money, livestock, property, and land that was donated. Some aristocrats, upon their passing, left behind a set amount of labor from their indentured serfs. This provided the Templars with access to a number of workforces. Because they could move freely between countries and were not to be subjected to any taxation (on Papal orders), the wealth of the Templars was exponentially rising. Within two decades of their founding, without the modern communications networks enjoyed by modern businesses, the order had properties and chapters throughout Europe, including stations in France, Scotland, Spain, Portugal, and England, as well as their bases in the Holy Land cities. As suggested by numerous historians, including Karen Ralls and Michael Benson, the Knights Templar could be considered the first multinational corporation in the history of the world.

With power and wealth came influence. The fame of the Knights Templar grew and grew. Despite their original aim being to protect pilgrims as they traveled across the Holy Lands, they were soon a cornerstone of a Crusader military in the Holy Lands. With bases across the region and support and members arriving from the richest, most powerful families of Europe, the Christians in the region depended on this cadre of organized, educated knights to lead the vanguard of the defense of the most sacred sites. John Robinson describes the Templars as the ‘largest standing army in the Christian kingdom’. An order which had first been formed under the guise of poverty and chastity soon found itself the favored charity of the Christian world, with riches flooding into its coffers. Thanks to the wealth they had

accrued, the Templars began to embark on an enterprise which may actually have led to their downfall.

Becoming the Bankers

Armed with a papal endorsement and a freedom from taxation, the Templars found themselves ideally positioned to become a bank. Any members joining the order took vows of poverty and donated their possessions to the Templars. Added to the gifts from others, donations, business dealings, and loot from military campaigns, the poverty-sworn monks found themselves with both a large amount of wealth and the ownership of a powerful, recognized international infrastructure. This allowed them to position themselves as a trusted institution, a place that the nobles of Europe would be able to use in legal dealings or as a bank.

For example, when a nobleman wished to join the Crusades, he might be away from his home for a number of years. He could entrust his wealth and power to the Templars and place his business dealings under their control. In their trust, it would all be safe for him to reclaim when he returned. Within a short time, the majority of the Templars' manpower was not dedicated to military roles, but to their financial wrangling. Their mission changed. Traditionally established to protect those traveling to the Holy Lands, their aim was now to protect the wealth of these pilgrims. They could even issue a form of credit, setting up the system which would evolve into what we know today as a modern bank. Any pilgrim visiting a Templar institution in his home country could deposit money or valuables and be issued a letter noting what they owned. This letter could be presented at any other Templar holding and would allow the pilgrim to withdraw money from the amount they had deposited. Without the need to carry around their wealth, the pilgrims were less of a target for bandits and attackers.

A key element of Templar success in this regard was their ability to communicate in code. When writing letters to one another, they would make use of an encryption method. This cypher took the familiar alphabet and passed it through a secret conversion technique, supposedly making use

of the Maltese Cross. Attempts to recreate this code in modern times have often been linked to freemasonry. As we will discover later in this book, attempts to uncover the code have led to many of our modern secret societies attempting to replicate, copy, or break the code without success. To this day, we have been unable to break the Templars banking cipher.

The rise from an impoverished monastic order to international bankers had not only created one of the world's first financial institutions, but it had given the Knights Templar a power beyond anything they could have expected. Less than a hundred years after their creation, they were one of the most powerful groups in Europe, if not the world. But they were still shrouded in secrecy. Only the brothers of the order were privy to their internal dealings and machinations. Their military contributions had gradually become overshadowed by their dealings in economics. While still an essential part of the military in the Holy Land, their true power came from their wealth, influence, and their holdings. With this power, they began to attract the jealous attentions of many throughout Europe. Just as quickly as they had risen to power, the Templars soon found themselves in peril.

The Downfall

In medieval Europe, just as now, it is impossible to build up such a huge amount of power and influence so quickly without attracting covetous attention from across the globe. As well as the sworn enemies of the Templars (the non-Christians), there were an increasing number of people who sought to undermine, share, and acquire the power they had so quickly accrued. In a dark time, it would be a dark process by which the enemies of the Knights Templar would wage their campaign against the order.

In addition to the banking and political influence of the Templars, it is important to remember their military prowess. Following the First Crusade, those who had been driven from the Holy Land had not simply accepted defeat. Fighting had continued, though it had ebbed and flowed in its intensity. As well as cementing their position as a banking institution, the Templars became more and more important to the Christians' armed forced. A key tenet of the Templars was the idea that they would never retreat from battle. This made them fearsome opponents. While the knights of the order fought on the front lines, many other members followed them. These members were tasked with finding anything that might benefit the order, whether that be loot or items of political importance. As the Christian army moved across the Near East, the Templars both led the line and scoured the conquered territories for anything that might help consolidate their power.

Also important was their use of tactics. It was one of their chief exponents, Bernard of Clairvaux, who had suggested that a small force could defeat a much larger one, should the conditions be right. One of the order's greatest victories was a demonstration of this theory, with the Templars lining up in 1177 against the famed Muslim leader Saladin. The ensuing Battle of Montgisard featured 26,000 Islamic warriors taking on a small band of 500 knights and their various supporting forces. Saladin had set his sights on moving north into Jerusalem and had pinned down the Christians in a small coastal town. Arriving to reinforce the Crusaders, 80 Templars met with their allies. They had initially met Saladin's forces near Gaza, but the group

had been so small that the larger army had considered them too insignificant to bother dealing with. The Templars moved to join with the Crusaders while Saladin permitted his forces the opportunity to pillage some local villages. The Templars planned a surprise attack with their allies and set an ambush. They routed the Muslim army who were spread too thin to fight back, and were forced to retreat. Saladin's army fled with only ten percent of their original number, but they lived to fight another day. The battle is considered an example of the Templar's incredible military abilities and their fighting skills.

The Squadron Charge

One of the most famous tactics of the Templars embodies their commitment to their faith. A heavily armored group of knights would line up and launch what was known as a 'squadron charge', wherein they would gather themselves into a tight formation and simply charge as fast as possible at the enemy. The manner of their charge suggested that they were fully prepared to die on their arrival and would have the powerful effect of forcing a hole in the opposing ranks as the soldiers broke away from their ranks to flee the oncoming Templars.

And the Templars were not limited to using their own armies — they would be key men in almost every Christian military. They fought alongside the Kings of England and France, either leading the charge or protecting the army's most important members. Their fighting was not even limited to the Near East, as they were vital members of the war efforts in Spain and Portugal as the European Christians fought back the Muslim forces who we encroaching as part of the much-feared southerly pincer movement. They were valued members of the front line wherever Christianity fought its fiercest battles. Not only were they rich, but they were admired and trusted. These qualities engendered just as much jealousy as the wealth of the Templars.

The Knights Templar were not the only monastic order. Others, such as the Teutonic Knights and the Knights Hospitaller had arisen in similar

circumstances, but were not nearly as successful. Though they worked towards ostensibly the same goals, the other orders soon grew concerned with the powers and privileges allowed to the Templars. In addition, various members of the European aristocracy noted their worries about the emerging political influence of the Knights Templar, who seemed to control an army of ever-increasing size that was not restrained by recognized borders.

The Second Crusade

One of the first stumbles came when the Templars' famed military acumen failed them. In 1187, they once again met the forces of Saladin at the Battle of the Horns of Hattin. This would later become known as a key moment in the history of the Crusades and one of the turning points in the Islamic control of the region. While they had beaten Saladin before, this time the Muslim commander was ready for the Templars. The order's leader at the time, Gerard de Ridefort, was not known as a particularly keen tactician and had only been head of the Templars for a few years. He was in command of the battle. One of his worst mistakes was venturing forth with his band of 80 knights with inadequate food, drink, and other essential supplies. Before long, the heat got to them and they were overwhelmed by Saladin's forces. The battle was a launching point for the Islamic forces. Within a few short months, they had captured Jerusalem and the main headquarters of the Templars.

This only prompted further aggression from the Christians and a renewed desire to retake the territory. Led by Richard I of England – Richard the Lionheart – a new Crusade was launched. The Templars played a key role in the military and re-established the Crusader states as they had been many years before. This time, the Templars chose to set up their headquarters in the city of Acre. Following this successful Crusade, the Templars took on even more power. The region became reliant on orders such as their own to maintain Christian control of the region. Having erected huge castles and fortifications in the area, it fell on orders such as the Templars – people who were there permanently – to guard, man, and defend these buildings. As

well as their powers in the region, the Templars' land holdings reached new heights when they acquired the island of Cyprus. However, every increase in wealth and power for the Templars during this century only did more to hammer the nails into their coffin. As they gained more and more, the covetous, jealous, and worried nobility of Europe watched. By the time the end of the thirteenth century came around, people were beginning to become more and more vocal in their condemnation of the Knights Templar.

Fighting in the Near East continued. In 1244, the Christians would lose Jerusalem for the last time. A Christian nation would not rule over the city again until the British invaded during the First World War. As the Islamic world gained a stronger and stronger foothold in the region, the Templars were continually forced to relocate. They lost their homes in Acre, Tortosa, and Atlit. Eventually, they withdrew their headquarters to Cyprus, a good distance from the Holy Land and the location of all of their original goals. This, too, was lost. The Mamluks from Egypt invaded and took the final Templar foothold in the Near East.

Leaving the Holy Land

By this time, however, the Knights Templar had a presence in most major cities. Their power was spread across Europe. They had risen over the last two centuries to become an ever-present and almost essential part of day-to-day Christian life. They still owned their Templar houses, many businesses, and ran their banking empire. They held debts from a number of powerful people — people who were not pleased to be owing the Templars money. Free from the laws and taxes of any country, they were essentially a nation without land, existing wherever they had property. They even had a standing army, one which no longer had a clear military aim, now that the Holy Land had been lost. This army was free to move anywhere in Europe. In addition to this, there had been rumors that the Templars were interested in founding their own monastic country, a place of their own. Should they manage to do so, they would become one of the continent's most influential power brokers.

The death knell began to sound in 1305. Over two hundred years after the Knights Templar had been founded, their original champions within the Catholic Church had long since passed away. A new Pope reigned, one with the idea to merge the Templars with the Hospitallers. He dispatched letters to the heads of both orders broaching the possibility and was met with negative reactions from both camps. Though not as powerful as the Templars, the Hospitallers were a proud order in their own right. Eventually, persisting with the idea, Pope Clement V invited both Jacques de Molay of the Templars and Fulk de Villaret of the Hospitallers to meet him in 1306. The head of the Templars arrived first, though he did not reach the meeting point until 1307. De Villaret followed a few months later, neither party in a rush.

While waiting for the arrival of De Villaret, the Pope and De Molay discussed allegations that had been made against the Templars by a departing member. These allegations had been championed by a powerful man, King Philip IV. Philip was king of France and no friend to the

Templars. Though most agreed that the allegations and rumors were false, they were damning enough that the Pope sent a letter to Philip asking for clarity. Philip had been waging a war with England and had managed to work himself deep into debt with the Templars. According to historians such as Malcolm Barber, Philip began to use the allegations to put pressure on the Church and the order, as a means of potentially freeing himself from the huge debt. Not only this, but the supposed location for the Templars new monastic state was Languedoc, in the southeast of France. There was also a religious motivation. If he was able to demonstrate the heresy of the Templars, Philip could claim his position as a defender of the Catholic faith and could cement his importance in the power structure of the Church. Should he successfully protect the Pope from the Templars' supposed influence, his role as protector would rank him above the Holy See, a move Julien Théry suggests could have led to the establishment of a holy theocracy in France.

The King of France

Before the investigation could continue, Philip pre-empted the Pope's efforts to investigate the rumors. He launched an operation to have scores of the Templars' French members arrested. They were taken away and tortured. These were not the front line, military leaders of the order, but rather those focused on the day-to-day economics of the Templars. Under torture, the members confessed to heretical tendencies, as well as other offences to God and the Church. Following their confessions, they were killed. Philip used these confessions to launch a series of charges against the entire organization of the Knights Templar. He suggested that they had:

1. Required new recruits to spit on the cross as part of their initiation.
2. The new recruits were then stripped and their navels, posteriors, and mouths kissed.
3. The order told new recruits that outlawed lusts (sexual practices) were in fact natural and practiced regularly.
4. The cords used by members to tie their robes was wrapped around a false idol and worshipped.

5. And finally, that the members did not partake in mass.

As well as these initial charges, Philip's agents further exaggerated the crimes. The Templars were accused of worshipping a three-faced cat, denying Christ, urinating on a crucifix, and worshipping the devil. Over the coming years, nearly 140 Templars would be arrested, tortured, and often executed. The vast majority confessed to the charges, whether they were true or not. The only evidence used was the confessions of the accused. The Knights Templar desperately sought out the Pope for assistance. Despite half-heartedly sending a letter, the Pope soon simply allowed the persecutions to take place.

The resulting rumors caused a scandal. Crowds of people took to the streets to demand the blaspheming Templars be prosecuted. Pressured by both King Philip and the baying public, Pope Clement laid down the *Pastoralis Praeeminentiae*, essentially a death sentence for the order. It decreed that every monarch in Europe should arrest every Templar they could and seize every asset they could. Though many rulers did not believe the charges, they began to make arrests in Germany, England, Italy, and other countries, including Cyprus. Whether or not the authorities could get a confession was typically dependent on whether or not the Templars were tortured.

Following the arrests, King Philip smashed the Templars' banking system. He took their wealth for himself and cancelled his own debts. As Gordon Napier notes, it is highly unlikely that he actually believed the charges to be true. Instead, he simply seized on the chance to swing the axe against the Templars and turn the balance of power in his favor. Whether there was a grain of truth in the rumors of the devil worshipping, homosexually-inclined Knights Templar, we may never know. What we do know is that, following Philip's orders, hundreds (if not thousands) of people were arrested, horribly tortured, and then executed across Europe.

Dissolution

In 1312, following further pressure from King Philip, a new Pope was convinced to officially dissolve the Knights Templar. A large amount of the order's properties were turned over to the papacy, while many of the Templars who had survived the purges were taken in by orders such as the Hospitallers. But certain elements of the order survived. In Portugal, the Templars changed their name to the Order of Christ and continued about their business. Others fled into the areas considered wilderness by the Catholic Church: Scotland, the Holy Land, and other countries where the Church's influence was not felt quite so invasively in every element of day-to-day life.

But what of the remaining Templars? At the time of the purge, the Knights Templar had over 15,000 properties across Europe and the Near East. They owned an armada of ships and an entire army. As well as the Knights and the main figures within the order, many lesser members were essential to the daily running of the Templars' economic empire. In France alone, the authorities were able to arrest 3,000 members. The Templars' archives were never recovered, having been either hidden or destroyed, despite the Pope ordering they be handed over to the Hospitallers.

From the ashes of the Knights Templar have emerged hundreds of theories. With so much wealth, property, power, and influence, that they could disappear almost overnight seems impossible. It is during this part of the tale, when we reflect on the possible alternate histories, potential futures, and dark secrets of the order that we start to see the truly fascinating elements of the Templars twisted history.

Now that we have a good overview of the history of the Knights Templar, we can start to look deeper into the secrets, mysteries, and theories surrounding their demise…and possible survival.

The Templar Fleet

One of the most popular theories about the demise of the Knights Templars combines the typical conspiracy tropes of a mysterious death, a huge fortune, and the emergence of a secret society. The theory suggests that a group of French Templars were able to escape persecution and fled to a new home. It has not only been discussed in more shrouded circles, but one of the bestselling books on the subject discusses the theory at length.

The legend tells us that the Templars had stationed 18 ships in the French harbor of La Rochelle. When the news first broke of the orders given to place them under arrest, the members of the order began to prepare for their departure. The knights gathered up treasure, documents, and important other valuables into the boats. The depths of the Templar vaults were filled not only with gold and jewels, but the tools of a true power broking society. They had paperwork relating to the various members of the order, their organization, and their structure. They possessed documents detailing their history and others listing the debts they were owed. They even possessed strange and mysterious items, relics, and assets which we can only guess at. All that can be said for sure about these vessels, however, is that they were heavy with the weight of many of the Templars greatest riches.

Just before the warrant for the arrest of every member of the order was given in 1307, the ships set sail. The evidence we have for this departure rests on the words of one man, Jean de Châlon, a member of the Templars. He told people that he had head that Gerard de Villiers had gone to sea with 18 of the Templars' galleys, while members like Hughes de Chalon had exited France with the entire treasury belonging to Hughes de Pairaud. All other utterances of these ships' departure is notably absent from history. In situations like this, we can either assume that Jean was spreading rumors, or that he was the one brother who let slip the existence of a secret exit plan. We know that the person who wrote down Jean's statement certainly took it to be simply rumor, while we also know that Jean was among those who was prone to inventing (or simply confessing) the wildest truths about the

Knights Templar. Many people doubt the credibility of Jean de Châlon, while other use his words as the key point in the discussion of what happened to the Templar fleet.

Fleeing to Scotland

The story was made famous by the book, 'Holy Blood, Holy Grail.' Written by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln, the book has become a cornerstone of Templar-based scholarly debates. Published in 1982, it is chiefly concerned with the bloodline of Jesus Christ and trying to map out a possible list of descendants that have survived into the modern era. The Knights Templars, they suggest, was possibly the military arm of the organization known as the Priory of Sion. Though we will delve deeper into the book's theories (and the arguments for and against its veracity) later in this book, their account of the escape of the Templar fleet is one of the best-rounded and most convincing around.

As the story is recalled in 'Holy Blood, Holy Grail,' the Templars who fled from France departed to Scotland. At the time, Scotland was fighting against the English for independence and the arrival of a small band of French monks (or so they appeared) might have escaped comment. Unlike many of the other major countries around Europe, the distractions and decentralized nature of the Scottish rebellion meant that there was not a government in place to execute the Papal orders. The man in charge of the Scottish rebellion, Robert the Bruce, had been excommunicated from the Catholic Church at the request of the English. For the Templars, this provided them with a place they could hide out until the persecution against their order died down.

Other historians have suggested that the Templars traveled to even farther-flung corners of the Earth. In this version of events, the Templars crossed the Atlantic Ocean and found themselves in North America. The legend suggests that they arrived in Nova Scotia, in Canada, whereupon they buried their treasure at a place called Oak Island. This part of the theory has been roundly dismissed, however, by historians such as Helen Nicholson. Nicholson points out that the ships that were available to the Templars at the time would have been unsuitable for crossing as large a body of water as the Atlantic, and especially unsuitable for making a journey through

previously uncharted and unknown waters. Even if there exists evidence that some Old World cultures traveled to the New World before Columbus, the idea that the Templars would have managed it is somewhat farfetched. As Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh point out, the Templar fleet was geared towards Mediterranean travel, or short trips around the area to restock companions in the Holy Land. Baigent and Leigh also note that trade with the British Isles was frequent, and that one of their primary ports for such trade was La Rochelle. Should they have wished to set sail from this part of France, Scotland was certainly a more likely destination that Canada.

A Stop in Portugal

Should the Templars have managed to escape the French prosecutors, another possible port of call was Almourol Castle, off the coast of Portugal. Unlike their Iberian neighbors, Spain and Portugal remained loyal to the Templars throughout their persecution, even hosting the Order of the Knights of Christ (an essentially re-branded branch of the Templars). This castle was representative of many of the fortifications used by the Templars, including towers and crenulations much like those found on other fortresses used and operated by the order. The Castle itself was built on the site of ancient defenses by a man named Gualdim Pais, a Master of the Knights Templar. Almourol would have provided the perfect destination for a fleet of fleeing Templars to hide for a short period, whether they were fleeing elsewhere or stopping in Portugal on a permanent basis.

According to Baigent and Leigh, the fleeing Templars made the journey from France to Almourol. Here, they met up with other members from across Europe and stayed a short while. They then fled up Ireland's west coast – where the order had a number of properties – and made the final steps of their journey across to Scotland. They arrived at known Templar locations such as Kilmartin, Kiilmory, and Castle Sweet and began to unload their vessels. While the majority of the theories relating to the Templars are focused on the items that were unloaded in these ports –

whether they were treasures, relics, or something else – Baigent and Leigh go further in their documentation of the Templars actions.

A Local Rebellion

The arrival of a band of militaristic, persecuted monastic knights in rebellious Scotland could well have shaped the course of British history. At the time, Robert the Bruce was leading his Scottish forces against the English but found himself severely outnumbered. Things came to a head in 1314, just a few years after the departing French Templars supposedly landed in Scotland. On June 24, Robert the Bruce was about to lead his 6,000 men into the Battle of Bannockburn in a field to the south of Edinburgh. He was coming up against 20,000 better equipped English soldiers. Despite the size of the respective forces, Robert emerged the victor. For Baigent and Leigh, the tide seemed to have been turned by Templar knights.

They note that the majority of scholars agree upon the idea that the Scottish army was composed chiefly of foot soldiers and that Robert was only able to count upon a handful of armed, mounted men. However, records indicate that during the course of the battle a fresh band of forces arrived to the English rear. These new knights drove the fear of God into the English soldiers, who turned and fled. While both the Scottish and English armies were exhausted on the field of battle, Baigent and Leigh note that panic swept through the English forces very suddenly and the King and his men were forced to flee the field. His troops followed and the pursuing Scottish forces were able to rout the departing men. The English abandoned everything as they fled, including not only their gold and silver, but their bags and their supplies. For Baigent and Leigh, the sheer terror instilled into the English army could only have come from one source: a small group of heavily armored Templars, leading their famous ‘squadron charge.’ Frightened by the arrival of such superior, fearless forces, the English immediately turned and ran, providing Robert the Bruce with a famous victory.

The idea of the arrival of the Templars on the battlefield is not so farfetched. King Edward of England was attempting to conquer Scotland and assert his control over the region. Robert the Bruce, already excommunicated by the Pope, saw this as an affront to his country and led his forces against King Edward in the name of freedom. For the Templars, however, Scotland had become a place of asylum. After fleeing the charges laid against them in France, much of Europe was still aggressively pursuing Templar influence in every corner of the continent. But Scotland was one place they were free from this persecution. It was entirely in their interests to see Robert victorious. Scotland retained her independence, while the Templars retained their temporary home away from the persecution of the rest of Europe.

The Templar fleet, while not one of the most blood-ridden or twisted examples of the Templar theories is, nevertheless, incredibly important. The idea of the fleeing Templars seeking sanctuary with all manner of treasures will form the basis for many of the theories we will examine in the coming chapters. As well as this, it is one of those rare alternative historical theories that not only has evidence to back it up from a number of sources, but serves to make a great deal of sense for all of those involved. As we read on, however, we will discover that the history of the Templars becomes a little bit more twisted.

Relics

Of all of the most enduring Templar myths, many of the most pressing and most interesting revolve around the existence of a number of historical relics. With two thousand years of history, the Christian faith has notably accrued a number of important and supposedly powerful items. These range from the Shroud of Turin (a piece of cloth supposedly bearing an imprint of Jesus's face) to the Arc of the Covenant (the storage device used to keep safe the tablets from which Moses learned of the Ten Commandments.)

Throughout history, the Templars have been linked to numerous relics and various items of historic importance. While not all are as feasible as the others, the multitude and regularity of the rumors indicate the suspicion with which many people treat the Knights Templar. Of all the places to start, however, it might be best to begin with their very first home, the Temple of Solomon.

The Temple of Solomon

Temple Mount is a hugely important religious site in at least four religions. Found in Jerusalem, it has been used by Paganism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity as a place of worship. As well as traditional temples, the site has also supposedly been home to many events of religious importance. For the Jewish faith, it is traditionally the holiest place in the world. It was where God swept together dust to make Adam and was the site of the story of the binding of Isaac. This was why it was chosen by the Jewish King Solomon as a site for his temple. Thought to be the wisest man of his age, he is a figure in all three Abrahamic religions. The temple is built on top of the Foundation Stone, a rock found right at the heart of the building's base. The rock has a tiny hole in one of its corners which enters into a larger cavern located beneath the stone. This cavern is known as the Well of Souls and it is thought to be the place on Earth closest to Heaven. As well as these traditionally Jewish tales, the stories have been passed down through Islam

and Christianity and the site is also hugely significant in these religions because of this.

After the First Crusade swept through Jerusalem, Temple Mount was one of the most fiercely defended sites. As both Jews and Muslims attempted to stop the Christian Crusaders gaining entry, they were cut down. According to sources at the time, the bloodstains went up to the knees of the Crusaders. But after the fighting had died down, a new order of knights found themselves in need of a home. The knights were given a wing in the Temple and took their name from the building, becoming the Knights Templar. But rather than a simple home and a nice story for the naming of a band of monastic knights, the significance of Temple Mount could be greater than anyone was prepared to admit.

The Templars were based in their original home for 75 years. For many researchers, however, the first nine years of their residence in this building seem to be the most interesting. During this time, the order's activities were incredibly clandestine. After appearing in paperwork and documentation at their founding, the discussions of the order seemed to vanish for nine years. The group's activities during this time are hotly disputed. For some, these nascent years were the source of all of the group's power. Having been given the Temple of Solomon as a base of operations, the legend goes, the Templars set out to discover more about their home. While their activity was seemingly limited to outsiders, inside they were working furiously.

Some scholars have suggested that the Templars discovered items of historical importance on the site. It is not unlikely that there was something of archaeological value to be found on Temple Mount. Even before Solomon had founded his temple on the site, it had been home to numerous buildings and its importance to Judaism had been noted. Returning to the book, 'Holy Blood, Holy Grail,' the suggestion has been that the Templars excavated the site and were able to find documents that had been hidden long before their arrival. These documents – whatever they contained – provided the Templars with enough power and influence to expand their order across Europe. Rather than being a beneficial set of lucky circumstances, the Templars' rise to power – their papal decrees and

accumulation of wealth – related to the information that was contained within these words.

Indeed, the idea that the Templars discovered something beneath the base of their headquarters is key to almost every theory and mystery. Whatever it was that they found during those nine years, it was likely the same thing they hid away when they fled La Rochelle centuries later. The idea that a relic was recovered by the Templars is supported by a small amount of evidence. Piers Paul Read notes that some Templar knights were known to carry a piece of the True Cross (the one on which Jesus was crucified) into battle. However, Read also notes that this particular relic likely came from an earlier piece dating back to Saint Helena in the 4th century. If we are to uncover the truth about the Knights Templar and their powerful order, we will need to know (or at least, construct an educated guess) as to what exactly they were able to recover from the grounds of one of the holiest places in all of the world. With so many distinct possibilities, and with the order so shrouded in secrecy, the quest to discover the truth behind the Templars' power has been an obsession for many, many people.

The Copper Scroll

Another item purportedly found beneath the temple is known as the Copper Scroll. Not as famous as many of the other relics we will come across, it certainly fits well into the story of the rise of the Templars. The Copper Scroll is part of the ancient collection of writings known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. But while the other texts in the collection are literary works and shed light on the early days of Christianity, the Copper Scroll is very different.

For a start, it is not written on the papyrus or paper used by the other scrolls. Instead, its writing is carved directly into a slab of metal, specifically copper, with a tiny amount of tin. Most importantly, however, it is not a piece of literature. Instead, it is simply a list, describing the burial locations of various amounts of gold, silver, and other treasures.

Our modern knowledge of the Copper Scroll comes from its rediscovery in 1952 by a British scholar. It was the last of the collection of scrolls to be discovered and researchers believe that it was a later addition, added separately from the main bulk of the collection. The same researchers have attempted to discern the origins of the treasure. Suggestions have ranged from it being the treasure of the Temple of the Mount, before one of the numerous occasions on which it was destroyed, right up to the idea that the tablet itself is a hoax and a distraction.

Robert Eisenman has written at length about the Copper Scroll and has argued for its authenticity. He claims that the Templars actually found a duplicate of the piece during their excavations. They traveled across the Holy Land during the first nine years of their existence and tracked down the buried gold and silver. This was then used to fund their order and to begin their banking empire. This would explain the Templars quick rise to power, their huge wealth, and the fact that very few of the locations listed on the scroll have proved to be profitable when treasure hunters have gone searching.

The Copper Scroll itself is now on display in a museum in Jordan. If it was indeed a treasure map detailing the means to find the treasures of Solomon's temple, then not only is it potentially one of the most credible Templar legends, but it could also have been the key to the Templars discovering other relics scattered across the Holy Land.

The Turin Shroud

Like the Copper Scroll, the Turin Shroud (or the Shroud of Turin) is a relic that still exists to this day and is very occasionally shown to the public. However, it was not always owned by the same people. For long passages of its life, the Shroud has been out of the public's eye. It currently resides (as the name suggests) in Turin, Italy.

Despite being a simple piece of ancient linen, the relic gains its power from supposedly being the cloth which was used to wrap the body of Jesus Christ

before he was first buried. When opened up, the Shroud displays the faint outlines of a man, including a vague image of a face. If it is real, then the Shroud is the closest we might ever get to looking upon the face of Jesus.

Scientists have attempted to use carbon dating methods to determine the age of the linen. Their findings seemed to suggest that the cloth came from the medieval period. While this might render the relic's holy status as negative, it does little to disassociate the Shroud's history from the Templars. Even if it were a fake, it was a fake good enough to fool people for almost 1,000 years. Should a group have the burial cloth of Jesus, they would hold a powerful relic. If it were a forgery, the very fact that people believed it to be authentic renders it almost as powerful.

The Turin Shroud's link to the Templar Knights begins around the time it was first shown to the public, in 1357. It was displayed by the widow of a recently deceased nobleman named Geoffrey of Charney. Geoffrey had supposedly inherited the Shroud from a family member. He could trace his lineage back to Geoffroi de Charney, one of the men who was executed by the French for his involvement with the Templars. Geoffroi has been one of the men burned at the stake after being tortured for a confession, placed alongside the highest ranking members of the order during his final moments.

But in 2009, paperwork emerged from the Vatican's Secret Archives which solidified the bond between the Charney family and the Shroud. Barbara Frale, a researcher, claimed to have found information which indicated that the Shroud had fallen into the possession of the Templars in 1204, alongside a collection of writings believed to be Jesus's 'burial certificate.' These writings were spread across pieces of a broken tablet, written in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin. The imprints of the words can still be seen on the Shroud.

Another recent piece of evidence linking the Shroud with the Templars is the painting found in a church in England during the 1940s. A woman named Molly Drew was searching through a home in Templecombe when she came across a picture depicting a man (either Jesus or John the Baptist)

and it contains a copy of the image found on the Shroud of Turin. It is though that the Templars commissioned the painting while still in possession of the Shroud and hid it during their persecution. The painting has been carbon dated to 1280, and it is an indication of the importance the Templars placed on the Shroud, commissioning paintings to celebrate its importance and to reflect its images of Jesus.

Whether the Turin Shroud is real or not is almost irrelevant in this discussion. That the Templars almost certainly controlled one of the most important relics in Christendom is a reflection of the position of power they held within the Church. Alternatively, the idea that the Shroud is a fake just demonstrates the length to which the Templars would go to consolidate their influence and - due to the seeming high quality of the forgery — demonstrates the skills they possessed at the time of its creation. Whether fake or real, we know that the Templars possessed the Shroud of Turin for many centuries and were able to use its power for their own purposes.

The Ark of the Covenant

One of the stranger suggestions regarding relics the Templars might possibly have recovered relates to one of the oldest Jewish treasures. The Ark of the Covenant is the name given to the wooden box which was used to carry the stone tablets bearing the Ten Commandments Moses had received from God, as well as other items such as the Rod of Aaron and a pot of the food from heaven, Manna. The chest was used during the exodus from Egypt to preserve the words of God and was lost over the ensuing centuries.

The historian Graham Hancock wrote a book titled ‘The Sign and the Seal,’ in which he put forward the idea that the Templars had uncovered information at the site of Temple Mount that pointed them towards the real resting place of the Ark. While it had formerly been at the site, it was moved before the first destruction of a temple on the grounds. The priests hid the Ark in Ethiopia and the fact that the Templars knew this is acknowledged in some of the art and architecture they left. One of the best

examples is the Cathedral found in Chartes, which was overseen by Bernard of Clairvaux, one of the order's greatest evangelists.

As well as discovering the resting place of the Ark, Hancock suggests that the Templars found many ancient secrets on the grounds of the temple. These secrets were not simply Church teachings or literature, but trade methods and building techniques that the Templars used in the construction of the forts and castles they built during their two centuries in power. While it is acknowledged that the discovery of the actual Ark of the Covenant is unlikely, the discussions and collection of ancient Jewish wisdom – colloquially referred to as the Ark - they might have found at Temple Mount is certainly a reasonable hypothesis. They then took this knowledge and used it to bolster their construction techniques and to build some of the most enduring and amazing fortifications seen at the time.

Before the idea is dismissed so readily, it might be worth looking to the sites that were left behind in Ethiopia. The Church of Saint George in the country was built during the medieval period and has been suggested by some scholars as being a Templar tribute to the information they uncovered in Jerusalem. While they might not have found the actual Ark, the knowledge they uncovered at the time transformed the order into the force it was destined to become.

Throughout their history, the Knights Templar have been linked with many of the relics commonly found throughout the history of Christianity. The items we have listed above are those with the best links to the order. These relics have allegedly been passed down from generation to generation, from the height of the Templars' power to the depths of their secrecy. And the secrecy plays a huge role in the story of the Knights Templar. Because they were driven from the public's eye and essentially outlawed, they have existed on the periphery of the cultural consciousness for the past six centuries. Any surviving members of the order have been happy to indulge in the rumors and theories attributed to the Templars. Because nothing can be denied, nothing can be confirmed. The Templars have been able to cloak themselves in the very rumors, secrets, and assumptions that so many people project on to them. In doing so, their true purposes are obfuscated.

Despite this, there are links and rumors which carry a little bit more credence than others. In the following chapters we will examine those theories and ideas that just will not leave the Templars. For those wishing to know the truth behind the order, the following chapters contain some of the most important knowledge we have been able to pick apart from the lies, allegations, and mistruths surrounding one of history's most secret societies.

The Holy Grail

The Holy Grail is the most important relic in Christian mythology. Legend tells us that the Grail is a receptacle – a cup, a plate, a dish, or something similar- that is forever linked to the death of Christ. According to the stories, the Grail is imbued with great power and those who drink from it can receive eternal youth, everlasting contentment, and it can even heal mortal wounds. The Grail was supposedly the very same item as the one used by Jesus during the last supper. Following the crucifixion, Joseph of Arimathea took the Grail and used it to collect the blood from Christ as he hung on the cross, punctured by a Roman spear. After the death and the resurrection, the Grail was handed down from generation to generation, kept hidden and safe. For some people, the Templars were the order entrusted to defend the Grail.

The earliest mentions we can trace of the Holy Grail come from medieval French writings. The word 'graal' is used, ostensibly descended from the Latin word 'gradalis' and working its way back through Greek and Aramaic. The first descriptions seem to come from Chrétien de Troyes, who talks about the item as though it was a dish or some type of bowl. Similarly, Hélinand of Froidmont's descriptions seem to talk about an item something like a saucer. Other writers from across Europe talked about the Grail as an item of tableware and even as a stone, but the references emerge not just from France, but from Spain, Wales, and Germany. The Holy Grail became a consistent figure in many romance stories of the medieval period, with the bravest of knights either trusted with the Grail itself or charged with hunting for it. Only the greatest and most honorable were said to be permitted to care for this most holy of relics.

Needless to say, the fame and popularity of the Grail legend emerged during the 12th and 13th centuries, the time when the Templars were rising to power. One theory put forth is that, having discovered the Grail, the order themselves spread the legend through Europe as they themselves established chapter after chapter in the various states and countries. Just as the Templars spread out from their original base atop the Temple Mount, the stories about the Holy Grail went with them. As the Templars became a regular fixture of contemporary medieval life, then the Grail became an increasingly common feature in literature and folklore. Whether this stems from the members of the order recounting tales or simply rumors spread by those who wished to know more about the Templars, all we know is that the stories of the Holy Grail have become inextricably linked to the tales of the Knights Templar.

Just as the Templars shot to fame suddenly, however, they became wanted just as quickly. If they did indeed possess the Grail, not only would it give both the Catholic Church and powerful aristocrats a reason to covet their power beyond their political influence, but it would suggest that the protection of the Grail soon became the Templars' chief mission. Though they had been founded in order to protect the Holy Land and to ensure the safe passages of pilgrims who wanted to visit Christianity's most sacred sites, they found themselves in possession of an item of far greater religious worth. Just as their attentions moved further and further away from the Holy Land, their focus turned elsewhere. With the Grail in hand, they would have had a far greater mission and one of the world's foremost links to the divine.

But as the Templars fled from the port in La Rochelle, the mission to keep the Grail safe took on new significance. While they had previously been a decentralized, militaristic order with special privileges from the Pope, they were now wanted men. In order to protect the Grail properly, they would need to go into hiding. For all the discussion about the size and importance of the Knights Templar at the time of their persecution, the relative speed with which they vanished from the face of the Earth was impressive. Should they have had something to hide – such as the holiest of relics – then they

would have had good reason for taking their order underground and fleeing from the watching gazes of those who might seek to take the Grail from them.

But what exactly happened to the Holy Grail once the Templars realized that they would need to take it into hiding? We turn, once again, to our main source on the matter, 'Holy Blood, Holy Grail,' in which the authors discuss the likeliest destinations following the turning of political opinion against the order. The authors suggest that the Grail's protection was the chief concern of the Templars. In order to best protect their treasure, the Templars took it to one of two places. It is either buried beneath a small church in Scotland named the Roslyn Chapel, or it was scurried away to be hidden in Northern Spain and the current location is not known. All attempts to dig beneath the Scottish chapel have been rebuffed and, following the emergence of the Templar and Grail theory, it has become a popular tourist spot among those looking for clues as to the final resting place of the Holy Grail.

But the authors of 'Holy Blood, Holy Grail' do not suggest that the theory behind the Templar involvement with the Grail is so simple. Instead, they put forward a far more complex and twisted suggestion. Rather than being an order of knights who discovered the Grail by chance, the authors trace the existence of the Templars back even further. To truly understand their theory, we must travel back to the time of Jesus.

As discussed in 'Holy Blood, Holy Grail,' Jesus was a married man. He took a wife. Though it is not discussed in the accounts that would eventually form the Bible, one of Jesus's companions – the woman named Mary Magdalene – could in fact trace her lineage back to the ancient Jewish King David. Jesus and Mary were married, and they had children. While the biblical figure of Jesus Christ may have died at the age of 33 and left behind only his followers, the authors point to gospels not included in the Bible (known as the Apocrypha) as being evidence for the existence of a bountiful marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

From Jesus and Mary Magdalene, the descendants of the marriage continued to survive throughout the rise of Christianity. These descendants became known as scions. Though few records exist that can trace the lineage directly, it is said that hundreds of years of survival lead to the scions forming the foundation for the great French house, the Merovingian family. This group controlled the kingdom of the Franks from as early as 457 (when our records of their lineage begin) until 751, when they were overthrown. But by this time, their presence among the aristocracy of Europe was enough that their activities, births, deaths, and descendants were monitored by those who remained aware of their true identity as the scions of Christ. In order to protect them, a secret society was formed. Rather than the Knights Templar, this society was known by the name the Priory of Sion.

The Priory were sworn to secrecy and took it upon themselves to recruit only the most intelligent and trustworthy members. But as the importance of their task grew and grew, it became clear that they would need a more functional organization in order to better provide protection for the Merovingian family and their descendants. This is where the Knights Templar came in. Formed as the Priory's military and financial branch, they were charged with creating the infrastructure and military capabilities that might be needed in order to battle against anyone who might seek to destroy the scions.

But who would want to wish harm on the descendants of Jesus Christ? According to the book, one of the chief ill-wishers of the scions is the Catholic Church. Following the efforts of Saint Paul to establish the first Church and to spread the word of God around the world via Catholicism, the institution had become one of the most powerful in the world and, more importantly, the line of Popes became the chief religious authority among men. Should the real identity of the scions ever be revealed, they would pose a threat to the power wielded by the papacy. Similarly, the Merovingian family still retained a certain amount of aristocratic respect and influence among the French population and nobility. At a time when a war of succession could see dynasties rise and fall, the ruling French kings were not entirely pleased that the traditional rulers of the country might be

lurking around in the shadows, especially if they had a supposedly divine right to rule. It was a combination of these two bodies – King Philip and the Pope – who broke apart the Priory's most visible wing, the Knights Templar.

In response to this attack, the Templars reverted to the behavior of the more secretive Priory of Sion. They went into hiding. Their members simply stepped back from public view and those most in control of the true intentions of the order were able to operate far from the prying eyes of their prosecutors. The Priory went on to include very famous men as members. Among the most notable were Leonardo da Vinci and Isaac Newton, who at various times throughout the Renaissance and Enlightenment headed up the Priory in the position of Grand Master (the same title as the head of the Templars.) They operated under the very noses of the Church and the aristocratic families who might seek to damage, attack, or otherwise harm the descendants of Jesus.

But what evidence exists for the idea that the Holy Grail was in fact a royal lineage, rather than a special cup? One of the most pressing discussed by the authors of 'Holy Blood, Holy Grail' is the one theory which gives the book its title. When looking through the early literary interpretations of the Holy Grail – those which did the most work to define the modern conception of the Grail as a cup – we must look to the old French sources. Here, we find a possible error, confusion, or intentional mistranslation. The name in Old French for the Holy Grail is 'san graal' or 'san gréal.' But if one letter in these words were to move, the meaning changes entirely. Move the letter 'g' and change the phrase from 'san greal' to 'sang real' and the translation is altered significantly. 'Sang real' translates to 'royal blood,' and with that alteration comes the idea that the Templars were not trying to protect a holy item, but the royal blood line itself. What the Templars found buried beneath the Temple of Solomon might have been the lineage of the scions, tracing the history of the Jewish prophet Jesus Christ into the medieval period and the truth about the descendants of Christ. This would then bolster the proof the Priory had of the history of the scions, as well as provide a huge amount of powerful documents that the Templars would need to rush away to a hiding place as soon as they were placed under

arrest. When fleeing, it could well have been these ancient family trees that the Templars were taking with them, hiding the existence of the scions away from the marauding forces of the French King and the Catholic Church.

The idea of the Grail being a bloodline is not as farfetched as you might think. It is not uncommon for the royal families of Europe to be able to trace their lineage back hundreds and even thousands of years. In the case of the Merovingian dynasty, they were one of the most powerful families around, and were supposedly descended from a clan of Israelites or people of Middle Eastern origin. In combining this history with the speculative, it is not impossible that they are able to trace their history back over many hundreds of years before they rose to power in the 8th century.

The theory does not even preclude a religious element. The historicity of Jesus Christ has been debated for many years. Aside from the divine aspect of his legend, whether he was an actual historical figure – a real man – is less questioned. If we are to believe biblical historians such as Robin Fox, Richard Carrier, and John Dickson, then the fact that a man named Jesus existed around the time of 2BC to 30BC is agreed upon with a "near universal consensus." The accuracy of the biblical accounts, the gospels, the teachings of the Catholic Church, and the belief of individuals in situations such as these is almost irrelevant. Instead, our information comes from apocryphal texts from the time, primary sources that were not created with any specific religious intent (as might be found in the bible.) Roman sources such as Tacitus and Jewish sources such as Josephus give us a non-Christian perspective on the man. But they are in agreement: Jesus of Nazareth was a real man.

If we are to accept this thesis – that there lived a Jewish man named Jesus during the early years of the 1st millennium who built up a cult following before being executed – then we can speculate on the likelihood of his having fathered children. It was extremely common, practically expected, that a man would be married before the time he reached thirty. In fact, were it not the case during this time period, then this fact would have been commented on by the people who wrote about Jesus's life. That his family

is rarely mentioned either means that there was no family (something very irregular for the time period) or that it was mundane enough not to draw notice. Following this trail of thought, the idea that he might have birthed a dynasty is not irreconcilable. From there, the idea of the Templars safeguarding the very records of this bloodline accounts for their sudden rise to power, their considerable influence, the anger which they elicited in some of the most powerful people, and their willingness to vanish back into the shadows.

While it might seem the more outlandish of the two suggestions, the idea that the Holy Grail is a dynasty rather than a magic cup is actually a far more reasonable suggestion. One does not even need to presume that Jesus of Nazareth was anything more than a preacher in the Holy Land who happened to be killed by the Romans in a particularly gruesome fashion. The divinity of the man does not dictate the possibility that he left behind a family. That he became so important following his death simply deepened the possibility that people would feel the need to document his descendants. The Templars, should this theory be true, form a small part of a wider picture. If you would like to dig deeper into the history of the Priory of Sion and the influence they have had on the world, there is a further reading section at the end of this book. For now though, we will move on to other theories put forward which threaten to shed light on the dark past of the Knights Templar.

De Molay's Curse

As fascinating as the rise and fall of the Knights Templar can be, one of the most important moments came right on the precipice between the moment when they were most powerful and the moment when they became outlaws. At this time, the brutality and bloodlust enjoyed by their enemies was almost unmatched in its prejudice. Not until the Protestant Reformation would Christian Europe encounter such a violent schism. Amid the executions, one man unleashed a curse upon his oppressors. It is only with hindsight that we can witness the scale and the scope of the curse of Jacques de Molay. But who was he, and why did his death cause such violent resonations?

We know little of Jacques' early years. It is reasonable to assume that he was born into a well-to-do family in the region of Burgundy, in modern day France. At the time, it was under the control of the Holy Roman Empire and ruled by Otto III. We know that he was born sometime between 1240 and 1250, though the exact year eludes us. As with many men who would eventually rise high in the ranks of the Templars, he was part of the nobility. This afforded him the chance to train as a knight and, when he was close to twenty years old, this training was rewarded with an invitation to join the order of the Knights Templar. Over the ensuing decades, he did work on behalf of the Templars, moving between France and the Holy Land.

In 1291, the Templar base in Acre fell to the invasion of the Mamluks from Egypt. De Molay was part of the forces who managed to escape with much of their wealth to set up their headquarters on the island of Cyprus. Here, Jacques de Molay was stationed with the most important man in the order, Thibaud Gaudin, the twenty-second Grand Master. In 1292, Gaudin died and the order was left with little in the way of legitimate contenders to take over the role. De Molay, despite his relative lack of experience, put himself forward. He made it his mission to rekindle interest in taking the Holy Land back in the name of Christendom and used this pretext to tour around the capitals of Europe, seemingly to raise support. He found it tough to secure

any firm promises of forces from the ruling classes, with few wanting to commit to a new Crusade. He was faced with papal requests that he merge the order with the Knights Hospitaller. Faced with the threat of the Egyptian Mamluks attacking Cyprus, he even tried to forge an alliance with a Mongol army in the East to sweep through Syria and remove the Islamic rulers in the region. This proposed alliance with the Mongols would have caught the Holy Land in a pincer movement between the Templars and the Mongols. But the Mongols never arrived. Despite the promise of helping the Crusaders and Templars in 1300, 1301, and 1302, the promised army never showed. De Molay watched on as the Crusaders lost their last footholds in the Holy Land and saw the Mamluks take over the island of Cyprus.

Jacques de Molay and his Knights Templar retreated to Europe. As we have discussed earlier in the book, Pope Clement V and King Philip IV began to place the order under increased amounts of pressure. King Philip's influence over the Catholic Church at this point was certainly dubious. Recognizing the French king's intentions, Pope Boniface VIII (one of Clement's predecessors) had attempted to have Philip excommunicated. Instead, Boniface was kidnapped and charged with committing heresy. The ordeal caused the elderly Pope to die of shock. He was followed by Pope Benedict XI, who died less than a year after taking charge in Rome. According to Helen Nicholson, it is quite likely that one of Philip's close friends, Guillaume de Nogaret, poisoned the Pope. Finally, when Clement took charge of the Church, he immediately recognized Philip's power, even moving the headquarters of Catholicism to Poitiers, in France. This was where Jacques de Molay arrived, unaware of the undue influence the King of France had over the papacy, and hoping to save his order from persecution.

As we know, he failed. Charges of heresy were lodged against the Knights Templar and orders issued for their arrest. Jacques de Molay was in Paris on the 12th of October, having attended the funeral of Catherine of Courtenay, the sister-in-law of the French King. He had carried her coffin from the church to the grave, a very great honor and one for which he had been specifically requested. The very next day, at dawn, he and his Templars

were arrested by the King's men. The allegations were remarkably similar to those pressed against Pope Boniface VIII when Philip had accused him of heresy. In the political game of cat and mouse, King Philip had cornered the Grand Master of the Knights Templar.

Jacques de Molay was taken to the University of Paris. Over the course of two days (the 24th and 25th of October,) he was repeatedly tortured by Philip's guardsmen. After 48 hours of torture, he was ready to admit that the Templars had, among other things, denied Jesus Christ and stamped on the cross. He signed a letter admitting to such actions and this letter was used by the King to force Pope Clement V to issue an arrest for the Knights Templar in every Christian nation.

But Clement was still not satisfied. He was unsure of the legitimacy of the confession and – behind Philip's back – he sent a pair of his trusted cardinals to talk to De Molay. They arrived in December and began to talk to the Grand Master, who took back everything he had confessed. For the next six months, the Pope stood up to Philip as they argued over how best to handle the Templar situation. It was agreed that the Knights Templar would be investigated by two bodies, one who would judge the individual members and one who would judge the order in its entirety.

Jacques de Molay, Grand Master of the Knights Templar, remained under lock and key. As the King of France and the Pope struggled for control of the persecution of the Knights Templar, he was occasionally wheeled out from his cell to appear before various courts. Sometimes he admitted to the crimes he was accused of, while other times he recanted his confessions. Appearing bedraggled, in pain, but still defiant, De Molay refused to go gently into the night. This infuriated King Philip so much that he simply decided, one day, to use the forced confessions as the one piece of evidence he needed. Despite the findings of various courts, despite the fact that the confessions had been withdrawn, and despite the hideous torture which the men had been placed under, King Philip sentenced De Molay and 53 other members of the Knights Templar to be burned at the stake.

Our best account of the morning of the death of Jacques de Molay comes from Henry Charles Lea, who was present. As he tells us, a scaffold platform was erected outside of the famous Notre Dame Cathedral. Jacques de Molay was wheeled out before the crowds. As the Grand Master, he was one of the more recognizable Templars, but many other high-ranking order members were there as well. It had been nearly seven years since the group had been arrested, and they had languished in a jail cell for the entire time. Members of the clergy were brought out to add authority to the judgement that was about to pass.

Because the Templars had been accused of such sordid crimes, they were facing a gruesome death. But before they could be executed, both Jacques de Molay and Geoffroi de Charney stood to address the crowd. Speaking in public for the first time in years, the men insisted upon their innocence. Their real crime was their lack of loyalty to the order of the Knights Templar and they were indeed guilty of betraying their vows, rather than the heresy with which they were charged. The charges, they insisted, were false, as were the confessions. The members of the clergy were perturbed by this turn of events and didn't know what to do. When King Philip discovered the executions had been delayed, he was apoplectic. He ruled that, regardless of their words, the Templars were heretics and were to be burned at the stake. The men were taken to the Ile des Juifs, an island on the Siene which is close to the grounds of the palace. Here, the Templars were burned alive. They died slowly but refused any help that was offered to them. Henry Charles Lea commends the dignity and composure with which the Templars died and notes that their martyr status was confirmed by the people in attendance, who collected the ashes from the fire and claimed them as relics.

But the death was not quite so simple. As he stood in the fires, the flames licking up around his bare flesh and blistering his skin, Jacques de Molay lashed out with his tongue. As he died his slow and painful death, with the nerves endings in his skin roasting one by one, De Molay screamed out a curse on his persecutors. Philip IV and Clement V, he bellowed, would soon join him. Before the end of the year, they too would be standing in front of God to answer for what they had done. As the smoke and the flames rose

higher and higher, those in attendance heard the curse, but could not know just how unerringly accurate it would become.

King Philip's death was entirely unexpected. At the age of 46, several months after the executions of the Templars, he took to one of his beloved hunting trips. Though he was a relatively healthy man and surrounded by attendants, they could do nothing to prevent their King being struck down by a stroke. After the initial attacks, Philip spent the next few weeks attempting to recover from this accident and surviving in great pain. He died shortly after.

Pope Clement's death was even stranger. Despite his age, his death was equally unexpected. After being discovered dead, his body was laid in state as is tradition. Over the church, however, a huge thunderstorm began to brew. In the deepest darkness of the night, a lightning bolt struck the church where his body was kept and set it ablaze. The church burned so fiercely and the flames were so hot that, despite the rain and people's attempts to quell the fire, the building was destroyed. With it, Clement's body was damaged beyond all recognition. After less than a year, Jacques de Molay's curse had been fulfilled.

Our account of the curse comes from a man who was present at the burning of the Templars. Geoffrey of Paris was the man who recorded the curse, which was discovered by Malcolm Barber. The stories of the curse have also been passed down elsewhere, however, and ancient rituals involving the Freemasons (whom we will cover in the next chapter) have demanded that those welcomed into the order trample on a papal tiara and a French crown, enacting vengeance on behalf of De Molay. The scars of his death have been remembered by this organization with close ties to the Templars.

The final chapter in the history of the curse of De Molay comes during another turbulent time in France's history. During the French Revolution, King Louis XVI of France was executed. He was taken to the guillotine and beheaded in public in 1793. Legend says that nearly five hundred years after a French King had publically executed the Grand Master of the Templars, a man ran from the crowd in the square before the guillotine.

According to whomever you choose to believe, he either thrust his hand into the pool of royal blood or lifted the severed head up to the crowd. As he did so, he screamed to the watching people, “Jacques de Molay, you have been avenged!”

The Freemasons

Any discussion of a secret society will eventually come round to the Freemasons. The Knights Templar are no different and – over the course of the last 800 years – people have tried to link the monastic order to Freemasonry on many occasions. While the Freemasons are a dark and mysterious institution in their own right, their links to the Templars are built on far more solid foundations than you might expect.

As with many theories about the Templars, the chief area of interest with regards to Freemasonry only begins once the Templars were forced into hiding. The fleet of Templar vessels that departed from La Rochelle is again the origin of the theory, with people choosing to accept the standard theory that the Templars relocated to Scotland in order to freely go about their business. The ties to the Freemasons begin once the Templars land in Scotland.

Thanks to our knowledge of some of the secret rituals of the Freemasons, we know that references to the Templars exist within their bylaws. The Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite contains degrees such as the Knight of Rose-Croix (the Rose Cross) and the Knight of Saint Andrew, both of which contain bylaw references to the Templars. In fact, the Freemason's 32nd Degree in Consistory makes a direct reference to the Masonic Knights Templar, but some have tried to dismiss these references as being purely ceremonial, rather than historical.

Others, such as John Robinson, have suggested that the bond runs much deeper than mere mentions in rule books. In his book, 'Born in Blood,' Robinson delves into the secrets he has uncovered about freemasonry. He agrees with the theory that the Templars fled to Scotland in the 1300s in order to escape the wrath of the French king and the Catholic Church. The members of the order beseeched the locals for sanctuary. They finally found refuge with a lodge run by the local Scottish masons who specialized in stonework. Staying with the lodge, the Templars began to impart their

chivalric values and religious beliefs. In order to teach the stonemasons about these qualities, they made use of the tools and items they found around the lodge, using them as metaphors for their lessons, establishing what would become the discourse of Freemasonry.

In no time, the lodge and the Templars expanded their group to include outsiders and people from the surrounding areas. These were called ‘speculative masons’ and their presence was seen by the Templars as a means of continuing their teachings in the less-than-ideal political climate. If the Knights Templar were to be driven into the ground, then this new group would be able to stand for many of the same values they had once embodied. This practice laid the foundations for a clandestine society who continued to remain in the shadows for the next several centuries, eventually revealing themselves in 1717 and taking on the name, ‘The United Grand Lodge of England.’

One of their greatest treasures has already been mentioned in this text. The Rosslyn Chapel, found in Scotland, is unique in its architecture. Anyone who walks into the church will immediately notice the idiosyncratic decorations. Rather than conventional Christian imagery, the church is covered in symbols, logos, designs, and characters from across the world. It is not limited to Christianity, but also includes Islamic, Hindi, Nordic, Celtic, Pagan, and many, many other cultural artifacts. The Earls of Rosslyn, who ordered the construction of the chapel, have long held ties to Freemasonry and are believed to have been directly involved in the creation of the church. Despite the fact that the chapel was created 100 years after the initial purge of the Templars, it not only encapsulates the teaching of both the Freemasons and the Templars, but is a physical manifestation of the close ideological links between the two organizations. This point is also made by Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh in their book, ‘The Temple and the Lodge.’

Even if the links between the Knights Templar and the Freemasons are hard to prove, why does it matter? Beyond the general conspiracy theories involving the Freemasons and their influence on world culture, the idea that one of the world’s foremost secret societies could so heavily influence

another is fascinating. Perhaps more interestingly, the Freemasons have managed to achieve a level of cultural acceptance that the Templars never managed. Aside from fringe criticism, Masonic presence is noted in almost every major city in the world and, typically, this passes without comment or concern. Unlike the Templars, whose presence and influence was unnerving for many major political powers, the Freemasons have managed to position themselves within society where they are essentially accepted.

With this in mind, the idea of the Templars directly influencing the birth of the Freemasons means that they were able to preserve many of their ideals and principals. In essence, the Templar influence on a second secret society allowed them to reinvent their order as something more socially accepted. In the 14th century, with the Crusades long over and no need for a militaristic presence in the Holy Land, as well as a growing list of enemies, the Knights Templar were in trouble. When this reached a head and they were forced to flee France, the Templars came up with a new solution. They reinvented themselves. Allying with a different society altogether, they were able to create a new order in an image better suited to contemporary society. They were able to use everything they had learned and impart everything they held dear, passing it on to the nascent Freemasons. Rather than a fighting religious order, this new society was a profession-oriented secret group. On the surface, they may have differed from the Freemasons, but deep down, the Templars were able to preserve their qualities and ensure they survived for generations to come.

The further removed we get from the initial contact between the Templars and the Freemasons, the more difficult it becomes to gather concrete information about their shared practices. While the Templars have fallen away into rumor, myth, and legend, the Freemasons have thrived. The handing of the baton between these secret societies could well have contained far more than simply codes of honor and chivalric practices. Instead, the secrets of the Templars may have been buried deep inside the core foundations of the Freemasons. Whether that relates to the truth about the Holy Grail, lingering prejudices involving the curse of Jacques de Molay, or just an incredible amount of wealth and treasure, we can only speculate.

Legacy

Having existed for close to nine hundred years, the Knights Templar have left a series of marks on our cultural landscape. Their presence and influence can be noticed in everything from their widespread logo — the red cross emblazoned across the white background — right down to the structure of the modern banking systems around the world. But there are many, many ways in which the Templars have left their mark, and some which you might never have imagined.

One popular legend connects the Knights Templar to the superstition surrounding the date Friday the 13th. In many Western cultures, this occasional arrangement of the date is considered to an unfortunate day, with bad experiences and poor luck often attributed to the day itself. It's held in the superstitions in much the same way as people might treat a black cat crossing their path or walking beneath a ladder. The legend goes back to Friday, October the 13th, 1307, the day on which the order for the arrest of every Templar knight was carried out. With these knights and order members then tortured and executed on the order of King Philip, the date became closely associated with the death of the Templars. Over the coming centuries, the times when the 13th of the month coincided with a Friday became engrained in superstition and the demise of the Templars.

Another commonly overlooked legacy of the Templars is the architectural treasures they left behind. With this presence stretching from the Holy Land to the furthest tips of Europe, they developed a reputation as master builders. Among the fortifications they left behind are:

- Sidon Sea Castle in Lebanon
- Commandry of Coulommiers, France
- Chastel Blanc, Syria
- Château Pèlerin, Israel
- San Bevignate church, Italy
- Castle of Almourol, Portugal

- Tourbillon Castle, Sion, Switzerland
- Tempelhof, Berlin, Germany
- The Temple and Temple Church, London

The order's history as a military and religious organization meant that many of these buildings blended the need for strong defense with the need for religious reverence. They remain among the most striking and stunning examples of medieval construction in the world.

The legacy of the Knights Templar has also been felt in the world of literature. One of the best loved books from the last century, Umberto Eco's 'Foucault's Pendulum' deals with the Templars as a central tenet of the storyline. Throughout the text, Eco blends his own research with invented conspiracy theories.

While it may not be based on fact, it does show the extent to which people are still willing to buy into stories about the Templars, and it reiterates that their fame and legacy has long outlived their organization. Just as books such as this one are still being written about the Knights Templar, people are still desperate to know more about such a dark, twisted, and secretive organization.

Conclusion

There are few organizations in the history of the world who have had as big an impact, relative to their size, as the Knights Templar. Not only did they establish a name and organization that is still recognized today, but they rose to become one of the key forces on the geopolitical scale. Their influence was felt on a national level and the banking system they helped invent became so successful that it ultimately led to their downfall.

With an organization such as this, it is to be expected that we should see so many theories and secrets put forward. Because the order themselves reveled in the secrecy and the clandestine nature of their society, it should come as no surprise to see that people have attempted to fill the void with rational explanations.

But beyond the intrigue, it is important to note the violence that followed the Templars. They were forged in the cradle of the Crusades, one of Christendom's most bloodthirsty, violent, and shameful moments. They came to embody the fight for the Holy Land and eventually met their demise in an equally sinister, twisted manner. Even when we're trying to discover more about the organization, the amount of people who died at their hands, or because of an association with the order should not be forgotten.

If you would like to discover more, there is a further reading section at the end of this book. For those who are seeking the full truth behind the Knights Templar, we may never know exactly what they had to hide. Until such time as we might know the entire truth, we will have to exist – much like the Templars themselves – in a world of myth, rumors, and lies.

Further Readings

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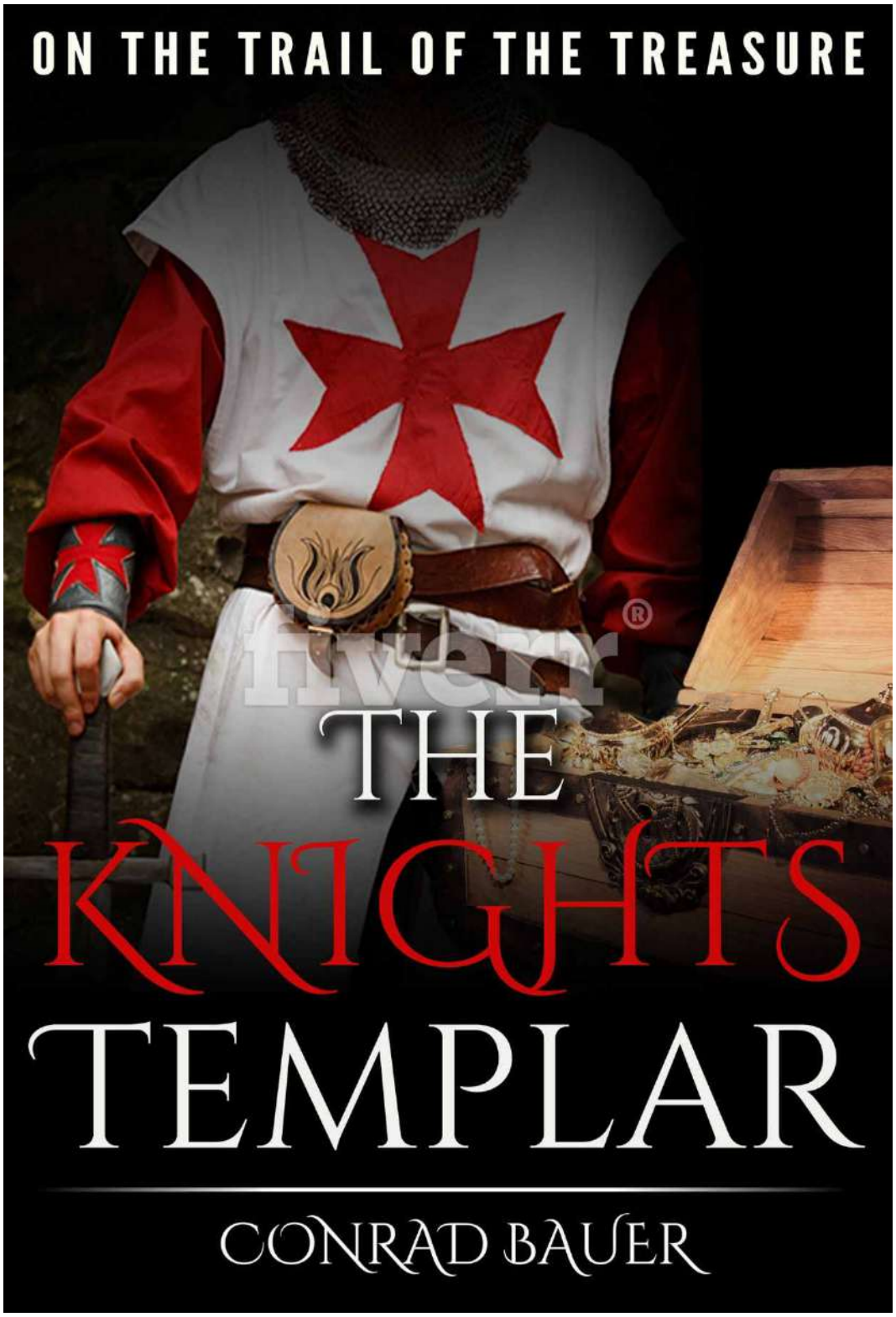
ON THE TRAIL OF THE TREASURE
THE
KNIGHTS
TEMPLAR
CONRAD BAUER

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Introduction

We're all familiar with the Knights Templar in some form or fashion, whether via pop culture references (*The Da Vinci Code*, *National Treasure*, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, etc.), a passing familiarity with history (as they made a name for themselves during the Crusades), or even via myths and legends of hidden treasure (which we'll discuss more throughout this book). What you may not know is that even among scholars, the Knights Templar – or Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon, as they were also named – questions far outweigh answers.

It's our hope that this book will help answer some of your questions, particularly as the lost treasure is concerned. What questions it doesn't answer – and we're certain you'll still have plenty of questions when you finish this book – we'll help you find the resources to search out your own answers, via the included reference section at the book's end.

Before we begin, though, we want to give you some idea what to expect from this book.

First, we want you to know that this book was painstakingly researched. Where appropriate, we've included footnotes so you can see where the information came from in a larger context, or so you can further explore on your own. However, not all information will include footnotes if it seems there are enough source materials that you could easily find the information again on your own without looking too hard.

Second, we want to offer a brief overview of what's ahead. We've broken this book into seven chapters, plus this introduction and a reference section at the end.

We'll begin by looking at the rise and fall of the order and providing some historical background. We'll keep this brief, just enough to help you get an idea of the context in which the Templars operated. If a larger history is

what you're looking for, we recommend checking out the first volume of the series The Knights Templar, The hidden History of the Knights Templar. Click here to go the book.

We'll look at how the Templars operated, focusing primarily on their code of honor. Understanding how the Templar organization worked is one of the keys to understanding what treasures they might have controlled, as well as what might have informed their decision making as to how and where to hide their treasures.

Next, we'll examine the legacy the Templars have left behind, and how they are portrayed today. The wide range of portrayals speaks to the power the Templars had – and the power they still have – over our imaginations.

We'll then look at some of the pieces of treasure we're most certain were once in Templar possession – the holy relics such as the Holy Grail, the Shroud of Turin, and the Ark of the Covenant. Coming to understand how the Templars interacted with such priceless, holy relics can help us better understand how they approached treasures in general.

We will also look at the Templar banking system, as it was a key piece in how the Templars built power and wealth, and laid the foundation for many banking principles still in practice today.

Finally we will discuss the Knights Templar treasure. Is the treasure real or just another legend? Operating on the assumption that the Templar treasure is still out there, somewhere, waiting for to be found, we will investigate some of the most common theories and speculation as to where that treasure might be, before letting you decide and maybe start searching.

Lastly, we'll leave you with the references that were instrumental in building this guide, so you can start your search with everything you need before you.

The Rise and Fall of the Order

The Knights Templar, originally known as the “Poor Knights of Christ and the Temple of Solomon” (or the “Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and the Temple of Solomon”) began in 1120 with only nine members. Suggested first by a French knight named Hughes de Payens, this group was formed and dedicated to the protection of Christians traveling from Jaffa to the

interior sites of the Holy Lands. King Baldwin II provided their original headquarters in one of the wings of the royal palace on Templar Mount. Previously part of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the grounds were believed to be the original site of King Solomon's temple, as well as one of the bloodiest locations of the invasion of Jerusalem in the First Crusade.

Of the original nine members, eight are known: Hughes de Payens, Godfrey de Saint-Omer, and Andre de Montbard are widely held as the original founders, to which Payne de Monteverdi, Geoffrey Bison, and Archaumbaud de St. Agnan, as well as two other knights – known only as Gondamer and Rossal – were added. The name of the ninth knight has never been confirmed. While some speculate that it may have been Count Hugh of Champagne, he was in France at the time, and later joined the Knights in 1125, upon his third visit to the Holy Land.

One thing we do know about the founding knights is that they were originally all related, either by blood or family. This, combined with their humble origins, helped spur them towards a life of secrecy and seclusion; the knights always saw themselves as tight knit, and throughout their history they have remained rather secretive.

Though now known for the vast riches and massive network they later accumulated, the original Knights were by no means well off. In fact, they had no backers at first, thus the “poor” in their original title. Similarly, their emblem showed two knights sharing a single horse – a far cry from what they would soon become.

For almost immediately, the Knights found backers, the first of whom was a French abbot of great standing, and Knight Andre de Montbard's nephew: Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard's support – and the letters he wrote urging others to support the Knights as well – meant the Templars soon became a favored charity of the church. Not only were they gifted sums of money, but donations to the order also included land, businesses, and the sons of noble families across Europe. For aristocrats who wanted to support the undertaking of the Crusades but who didn't want to fight themselves,

sending a son to serve in the Knights Templar was an alternative way to earn the family great honor.

As a result of the honor and prestige service with the Knights could bring a family, as well as their good standing within the church, both their ranks and their coffers grew very quickly. Strangely enough, though, very little was said about the Knights Templar in anything written at the time. This led many to believe that they were intentionally a rather secretive group from the very beginning.

For instance, we know of little that was written about the Knights Templar before 1129 – a full nine years after they were formed. This was despite their clear position of privilege in the church; after all, their headquarters were at the location of one of the holiest sites (Solomon's Temple) in the holiest of holy cities (Jerusalem), meaning they were afforded a great deal of respect even at the start.

In 1129 they were officially sanctioned by the church at the Council of Troynes. As such, they became recognized as a warrior arm of the church, men who took up the sword to defend the innocent and protect the church. As their patron Bernard wrote of the Knights, "[A Templar knight] is truly a fearless knight, and secure on every side, for his soul is protected by the armor of faith, just as his body is protected by the armor of steel. He is thus doubly-armed, and need fear neither demons nor men."[1]

Only ten years after first being recognized by the church, they were given far more power, when in 1139 Pope Innocent II issued a papal bull[2] stating that the Knights Templar were subject to no man but the Pope himself. This meant they did not pay taxes, nor were they stopped at any border. As a result, less than 20 years after their founding, the Knights Templar found themselves with nearly unlimited power and resources.

The Knights were shrewd tacticians and their prowess in war was widely noted. This is, of course, more widely discussed in our general history of the Knights Templar [link to purchase first book here].

Of particular interest to us now, however, is how quickly the Knights Templar became responsible for large tracts of land, property, and ownings – and very quickly came to hold more value in their trusts than any of the banks.

We'll discuss the Templar's banking system in greater detail later in the book, but a brief overview here will help give a sense of how quickly they were able to accumulate and centralize power and riches.

In particular, the papal bull issued by Pope Innocent II made them a charity across the entire span of Europe. As new members took a vow of poverty upon joining, they frequently donated their possessions and holdings to the order at that time. Additionally, as the order oversaw these quickly growing holdings, their business dealings netted them yet more money, property, and power.

Similarly, when nobles joined the order, even the possessions and holdings not donated to the order were most frequently placed under their protection, meaning the Knights Templar controlled all of that land until the noble returned from the Crusades – years later, if at all. Before long, the majority of the Templar infrastructure was committed to running their businesses.

By 1150, the mission of the order itself seemed to have changed to reflect this, as their main undertaking, instead of protecting the pilgrims traveling to and from Jerusalem, was now guarding valuables for those pilgrims.

Pilgrims might, for instance, visit a Templar office in their home country before beginning their pilgrimage, at which time they would leave their valuables and deeds with the Knights. They would then be given a letter of credit that described their holdings, and upon their return, would exchange that letter once more for the return of their valuables.

Of course, many of those pilgrims did not return, or lost their letters of credit; these valuables then became yet another holding of the Knights.

Another advantage of this system was that the Knights acted as bankers of a sort across the major pilgrimage routes, so when pilgrims needed goods or services, they could present their letter at another Templar house and in such a way make a withdrawal from their original holdings. This helped keep travelers safe, as they weren't carrying their valuables, but it also meant that Templars could charge a small fee or percentage as rent for their services.

Such was the power of the Templars that, though lending to collect interest was officially forbidden by the church, the church looked away and allowed them to use loopholes. As one prominent Templar researcher has noted, "Since they weren't allowed to charge interest, they charged rent instead."[3]

As their power grew, so did the complexity of their banking. While we'll touch on this more in later in this book, it's interesting to note that Templars may have begun using ciphers and codes based on a Maltese Cross as early as 1150.[4]

Their increased power and holdings also meant that they could ask more of new knights joining the order; from 1180 to 1260 the cost of entry for a new noble pledging as a knight rose from 3 km² of land to 15.6 km². As a result, their power grew exponentially – at one point they owned the entire island of Cyprus.[5]

With any operation as large as the Knights Templar became, however, there is always a fall, and the fall for the Knights Templar came suddenly and unexpectedly. By the end of the Third Crusade, led by Richard the Lionheart, the Templars were likely as powerful as they ever became. In 1291, shortly after the Siege of Acre, the Templars relocated their headquarters to Cyprus, and soon Jacques de Molay took office as Grand Master of the order.

After they gained further financial backing from Charles II of Naples and Edward the I of England, as well as the same papal privileges previously extended by Innocent II via the new Pope Boniface VIII, things looked good for the Templars.[6]

But the coming years were not as kind to the Templars and the other crusaders of the church. In in the years 1298 through 1300, fortresses began to fall to the Muslims, and while the Templars retained their base on Cyprus, they lost their last Holy Land fortress, at Arwad, in 1300.[7]

While this didn't affect many of their holdings across Europe, or their vast financial network, it left the Order without a specific purpose, as the Holy Lands had clearly been lost. The end was coming – and it came more quickly than anyone might have imagined.

We'll mention this briefly, as it's covered in far more depth in our general history of the Knights Templar [click here to go the book].

Of particular interest to us here is King Philip's IV of France's history with the Templars. Philip believed that the Templars wanted to form their own state, the way Prussia was founded by the Teutons, and furthermore, he believed that while they were currently happy with their base of operations on Cyprus, he knew they had their eye on Languedoc, in southern France. Knowing how the Templars had helped Amalric of Tyre overthrow King Henry II in Cyprus in 1306, Philip had good reason to worry the Templars might come for him. All of this was further complicated by the fact that Philip had inherited his father's debt to the Templars, and his kingdom was poor.

As a result, Philip choose to strike first. On a Friday (October 13th, 1307) as the sun rose, his agents simultaneously raided and arrested dozens of French Templars. Initially the Templars were tortured, and five charges[8] (mostly of heresy and sacrilege) were brought against them:

1. men spitting on the cross during initiation into the Order;
2. men being stripped during their initiation, and kissed improperly by the preceptor in the Order;
3. men of the Order indulging in unnatural lust;
4. men of the Order wearing cords of idolatry (according to the charges, they worshiped an idol – a bearded human head)

5. priests of the Order not properly celebrating Mass, as the host wasn't properly consecrated.

Through the following year, these charges grew more and more outlandish, [9] and over the following years, more than a hundred of the accused Templars confessed, though those confessions all came under torture.[10]

In response to these accusations and the scandal they caused in Paris and elsewhere, Pope Clement V responded by issuing a papal bull that called for the arrest of all the Templars, in addition to the seizing of all of their assets. [11] Even if the instructed monarchs may not have believed the charges against the Templars, the bull offered them free access to the Templar's vast resources, and so proceedings began in several other countries against the Templars.[12]

By 1312, Pope Clement V had ordered the official dissolution of the Knights Templar – less than 200 years after their founding. Even those kings and nobles who, up until this point, had supported the Templars did as the Pope asked, though not all the Templars were persecuted as they'd been in France. In England, for instance, many of the Templars were found not guilty of the charges brought against them.

Across Europe, Templar holdings changed hands, much of it going to the Knights Hospitaller, though in Portugal, the Templars simply changed their name, becoming the Order of Christ. (And as the Order of Christ, continued to make major contributions to society; many of the first naval discoveries by the Portuguese were made by members of the Order.)

Throughout this tumultuous time, though, there's no question that many of the Templars and their holdings simply disappeared. For instance, at one time there had been as many as 15,000 (if not more) Templar Houses, as well as an entire fleet of ships. Even in France, where hundreds of Templars were detained, this was still only a small percentage of the knights that had been in the country. Even more interesting, is that all of the Templars' extensive financial records went missing – and were never recovered.

There are multiple theories as to what happened with those Templars, their ships, and perhaps their treasures – but we'll get to that in chapters to come.

The Meaning of Being a Knights Templar

In everything the Templars did, they were expected to adhere to a strict code of honor that would allow them to both keep up their fighting strength and skill and reflect positively on the church and their Christian morals.

Because of their position as knights, the normal restrictions of monks and other holy men would not do – they could not fast, for instance, without losing their strength.

Instead, they focused on four main points that would help orient their aristocratic military strength with the virtue of their faith:

1. Physical strength
2. Courage and honor
3. Loyalty to the Templar order
4. The spirit of sacrifice

These four points were stressed heavily, and as a result, were intended to make the Knights Templar an organization for only the most select, as a decided minority of those interested could combine the appropriate physical and psychological qualities with an equally appropriate religious commitment.

Some of these attributes were heavily codified in Templar regulations, and others were more selectively enforced by the things the Templars chose to value in their daily practice. Regardless, each of them went a long way in helping the Templars stand out, and are part of why they are so well regarded even today, nearly a thousand years later.

Physical Strength

While the Knights Templar were in several ways very much like other extensions of the church, such as the Benedictine monasteries, the physical requirements of their tasks also necessitated some major differences.

For instance, whereas the monks regularly fasted, Templars could ill afford to do so, and made a very conscious effort to maintain a strong, healthy diet. Likewise, Templars did not whip themselves, as many monks did, for they didn't ever want to be weakened, in case they might be less ready for battle.

Toward that end, some Templar houses actually required knights eat in pairs, so a knight could not fast in secret – should any knight attempt to do

something (even if in the pursuit of holiness) that might make him a lesser soldier for the Order, his brother knight was obligated to report him.[13]

Courage and Honor

One of the biggest ways the Knights Templar were different from other orders and church organizations was their refusal to admit boys. While some of this was practical – caring for the knights was expensive enough

without adding the expense of raising boys – it was also a matter of discipline, courage, and honor.

Templars wanted to make sure that their new initiates were bound to the same aims as the larger order, and so they much preferred their new knights be fully mature, and fully aware of the life they were casting aside.

In some documents, it actually seems clear that Bernard had an ideal in mind even as the Knights Templar were first forming: a mature widower, such that they could leave their secular life behind and under the rule of their first-born son, made the perfect knight candidate.

Courage and honor were prerequisites of the Templar knight, as they represented the order in everything they did, and to bring shame to the order was to fail in their duties. Even in combat, they were expected to behave a certain way, such that even many of the Muslim chroniclers of the time speak well of the Templars.

Loyalty to the Templar Order

It was expected that the knight's first priority was always the order. This was shown in all their actions, and codified in all their regulations.

Each knight swore in his pledge to die for the church, and by extension, the Templar Order, without question, and he considered it a great honor to the have the opportunity to do so. As the regulations stated:

“No one must leave his position without the permission of his commander, not even if he is wounded...And if by chance it should happen that the Christians are defeated...no brother must leave the field of battle as long as the banner of the Temple is still flying, and anyone in violation will be expelled from the order.”[14]

Even if a Templar was the last surviving member of his regiment, he was expected to find other Christians to fight with, and he was expected to die with them if that is what the battle required. Not only was it demanded that he be loyal to the order, but also to the larger body of Christians fighting.

This bond, and loyalty to the order, especially showed in their fighting tactics. For their time, their organization and ability to fight cohesively was an unusual and remarkable achievement. This was established by ensuring in all regulations that knights put the order above themselves – they were not allowed property, nor were they allowed to upgrade their equipment, accept gifts, or in any way better their lot without the express permission of their commander.

Spirit of Sacrifice

As pride was regularly an attribute – and a desired one, normally – among knights, the Templars fought to reconcile this pride with the humility the Church required. Fortunately, they were able to find a compromise: Templars were expected to be humble as individuals, while maintaining pride in the Order. Connected with the loyalty previously required, this meant that knights of the order learned to put the order first, which required the development of a spirit of self-sacrifice.[15]

This manifested in many ways. As a way of demonstrating their humility, Templars were expected to dress simply – in direct contrast to other knights of the era, who often dressed themselves in lavish robes. Instead, Templars wore either black or white (or other basic monotone colors), and only very simple fabrics. While Templars were allowed to carry a change or two of clothing to ensure hygiene, their hair was kept short (if not shaved), again in contrast to the style of the age, and sergeants' clothing was kept even more simple than knights'.

In accordance with this new-found simplicity, knights were expected to donate all their clothing to the draper upon joining. Not only would the draper then use those garments to make new garments in the style chosen by the Templars, but if the donated wares were too lavish for the cause, those garments were donated to the poor.

Templars' living accommodations were likewise sparse, as each knight was given a straw mattress, a solitary sheet, and a single blanket (though the blanket was occasionally replaced with a quilt). Similarly, Templars were prohibited from bathing without permission from their commander.

Perhaps it goes without saying, but it was also expected of each Templar that they readily give their life to the cause, should it be needed. In fact, many knights looked forward to the possibility of dying in service, as this guaranteed them entry into heaven.

Similar regulations stressing simplicity included such restrictions as how loudly they were to pray, and whether they were allowed to stand in prayer. Notes one writer of their precepts:

> "You are all to sit during the antiphon and the hymn, whether you are healthy or sick, so as not to give cause for scandal...[likewise] you pray observing the just measure in body and spirit, that is, sitting and standing when provided and with simplicity, in utmost reverence and without shouting, so that each does not disturb the other."[16]

Other regulations were similar – all to the effect that the Templars would not embrace fanaticism, which could distract or otherwise cause problems for the whole order. Instead, each knight was to do all things in moderation.

That same sensibility led to their regulations regarding their sins. For instance, while Templars were prohibited from sleeping with prostitutes, they were nonetheless commanded that if they did so, it should be in such a way that no other knight might observe them sinning, so their weakness wouldn't cause their peers to falter.

While the first regulations regarding these four main points of the Templars Code of Honor were codified in 1129 (at which time there were roughly seventy formal regulations, originally written in Latin), it seems quite clear that even before properly codified, the Templars prided themselves on their honor, and their adherence to the ethics and conduct of their order.

This code, both simple in its use of only four main cardinal virtues, and pragmatic in its regular adherence to moderation and simplicity, stood out when compared to other orders and brotherhoods of the age, and may be part of why it has remained in our consciousness as it has.

Many suspect, for instance, that the Freemasons got their start if not directly from the Knights Templar, then at least indirectly, and were heavily influenced, at that. Many Illuminati-type conspiracy theories can be traced back to ideas related to the Knights Templar – who perhaps because of their code of honor and the intrigue that surrounds their stories – remain in the forefront of pseudo-historical mythology and stories.

We'll examine this relationship in more detail in the chapters to come.

The Knights Templar Legacy

Almourol castle in Ribatejo, Portugal

There is perhaps no organization so well encapsulated in myth and legend as the Templars – even some things you may at first not be aware of, but are no less indebted to the Templars for their origin stories.

In particular, Templar treasure lives on in myth and legend Templars are still considered the forebears of many other secret (or even less secret) societies today, and we'll look into those claims. Lastly, we'll look a little at how Templars are currently portrayed in pop culture, both in historical fiction and in mystery pieces.

First, though, let's briefly consider those relics connected to the Templars, which for many form the basis for the idea of the Templars as keepers of long-lost treasures.

There are several relics in particular that have been connected to the Templars. Those most notable relics are as follows:

- The Holy Grail
- The Ark of the Covenant
- The Shroud of Turin

We'll discuss each in more detail in the next chapter, but for now we bring them to the forefront only to show how the Templars are clearly a part of popular culture, even today. Each of those three main relics features prominently in a wide number of myths, and historical fiction and mysteries we all know. And more come out every year.

Part of this is likely the result of the many claims to Templar heritage other organizations make – either on their own behalf, or in the shadowy corners of imagination and the internet, where others may theorize connections. Let's spend a little bit of time examining some of the many organizations that have been connected, to varying degrees, to the historical thread of the Knights Templar.

We especially want to look at least briefly at two historical arms that now serve to support much of the legacy of the Knights Templar. First, the Freemasons, and the many Masonic organizations whose tradition derives at least in part from the Templars, and second, the many groups which have taken at least part of their name or legacy from the Templars, even if they are not historically connected.

We'll begin by looking at the Freemasons. While officially the Freemasons say that no single Masonic organization can claim a direct lineage from the Knights Templar, it's also immediately obvious that some of the Masonic orders are patterned after the Templars. Consider this a short introduction to some of those connections:

- The Order of DeMolay, an American Masonic youth organization, is named for the last Grand Master Templar, Jacques de Molay.

- The Royal Order of Scotland observes ceremonies and rites to this day that many consider evidence of a historical Templar-Masonic lineage. Some reading will soon demonstrate that how far you want to take this parallel depends on how many inferences you wish to draw.
- Edinburgh's Rosslyn Chapel is among the many churches across Europe whose architecture points both to the Templars and the Freemasons, though some scholars dispute this.[17] (One piece of evidence for this is the connection of the Earls of Rosslyn with Scottish Freemasonry.)
- Some legends posit that the excommunicated Scottish king Robert the Bruce was aided by the Knights in his escape, and this story is part of the basis for the Royal Order of Scotland, a Masonic organization.

If this is an area that interests you, please note that this is only a small survey of the many ways in which the Freemasons and Templars have been connected. Entire books have been devoted to the connection, and you could easily spend years exploring the combination of history and mythology that make it such a fascinating link.

That brings us to the second type of legacy organization – the many groups that take their name or some of their traditions or rituals from the Templars, even if they cannot be historically linked. Among the groups that are connected to the Templars in this way are organizations such as the following:

- The Order of the Solar Temple[18]
- The Ordo Templi Orientis[19]
- The Sovereign Military Order of the Temple of Jerusalem[20]
- The Militi Templi Scotia[21]

There are many other organizations that likewise try to connect themselves to the Templars, but the four above are the most prominent, either by these names or other similar names for the same organizations.

That brings us to the biggest piece of the Templar legacy today: how they're currently portrayed in pop culture.

It's certainly true that many depictions of the Templars in pop culture are not historically accurate – but that does not mean that these depictions don't still keep the Knights Templar at the forefront of our collective consciousness.

In many instances, the Templars are depicted as a secret society still living somehow in the shadows. Both *The DaVinci Code*[22] and *National Treasure*[23], for instance, made references to the Templars as a shadowy arm of the Freemasons, obscuring hidden treasures and dark secrets. It's not uncommon to see them portrayed as an evil secret society.[24]

We can see this pretty clearly if we look at more of the recent books and movies in which the Knights Templar have been portrayed. For the sake of brevity, a few ground rules in making this list:

1. We're only including books or movies, as they're by far the most common mediums for the Templars in current popular culture.
2. We're only looking at relatively recent releases – this means within the last 15 years. While there are older references (*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, or the original *Indiana Jones* movies, for instance), popular culture tends to move quickly.

Even within those restraints, the lists are quite lengthy – and these are only books or movies that sold relatively well, and does not include all of the web traffic that references the Templars in some way. In chronological order, below are some of the best-selling Templar pop culture works includes amongst other:

- *Crusade of Fire*, Katherine Kurtz (2002). Kurtz has also written many other books with characters and themes in the Templar tradition.
- *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown (2003) and adapted into film (2006) was an international bestseller, and may have prompted at least in part the following rush of Templar-related works.
- *National Treasure* (2004) starred Nicolas Cage in his search for the long-lost Templar treasure.
- *The Last Templar*, Raymond Khoury (2005), and adapted into film in 2009. Again, the lost secrets of the Templar treasure feature prominently.

- *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) posits a fictionalized past in which the last King of Jerusalem was a Templar.
- *Revenge of the Shadow King*, Derek Benz and JS Lewis (2006) offers one of the more popular theories of the day: That the Templars still exist today as a shadow organization.
- *The Templar Legacy*, Steve Berry (2006) posits that the Templar treasure may be close to discovery. We'll come back to this question in later chapters.
- *The Wheel of Time* series, Robert Jordan writes one of the best-selling fantasy series of all time, at least in part because of the starring Children of the Light – who might well be recognized as a fictionalized version of the Templar Knights.
- *Knightfall* is a current and ongoing History Channel drama which features the Knights Templar prominently. The History Channel has also run multiple specials in recent years on the possibilities of the Templar treasure.
- *Dragon's Age* is an extremely popular game, and features an organization called Templars, which feature multiple connections to the Catholic church.
- *Assassin's Creed*, one of the best-selling games of all time, similarly features the Templars as antagonists to the Assassins. A key point here is the number of Illuminati conspiracy theories built into the game.

Outside of more recent works looking at the Knights Templar, these are a few of the older, historic works that are significant because of their place in popular culture, in chronological order.

- *Ivanhoe*, Sir Walter Scott (1820). The villian of the story is a Templar Knight named Sir Brian de Bois-Gilbert.
- *The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids*, Herman Melville (1855). Melville, with his wry sense of humor, refers to the Templars ironically in this short story.
- *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), even if entirely tongue-in-cheek comedy, was one of the first blockbuster cult classics to really address the idea of the Holy Grail in more modern pop culture, and as such, offered a bit of foundation for future works.

- *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (1982) seems to be the foundation for the thought that they Templars discovered the Holy Grail and took it with them to Scotland. We'll return to this thought later.
- *Foucault's Pendulum*, Umberto Eco (1988) was one of the first major works to feature the Knights Templar mythology, particularly in reference to their history as the keepers and defenders of the Holy Grail.
- *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989) likewise focuses on a fictionalized version of the Knights Templar as defenders of the Holy Grail.

Again, though, this is a very short list, and serves only as an overview to reinforce the point that Templars remain at the center of many popular historical fictions and conspiracy theories. The popularity of programs and works examining the long-lost and uncertain Templar treasure are also a testament to their place in popular culture.

We'll address the possibility of treasure more fully in the chapters ahead, beginning with our next chapter, as it focuses on the Knights Templar relics.

Relics of the Knights Templar

This brings us to the many relics of the Knights Templar, each of which have its place both in history and folklore or mythology, and each of which has been connected in various ways to the idea of much larger treasures.

We're particularly interested in a handful of relics:

- The Holy Grail
- The Shroud of Turin
- The Ark of the Covenant

We'll explore the mythology of the Templar's lost account logs, as well as how they may be connected to the idea of hidden Templar treasure.

The Holy Grail

Ideas as to what, precisely, the Holy Grail is vary a bit, but there are two main ideas:

- The Grail is a cup or chalice, dating back to King Arthur's court.
- The Grail is an idea, and may represent the womb, particularly combined with the theory that Jesus fathered children with Mary Magdalene.

Some pieces of mythos combine both ideas, but in general, stories of The Holy Grail point to one idea or the other.

The more common idea is that The Holy Grail was, in fact, an actual chalice, and the Templars found it. From there, theories diverge. Some theorists say that the Holy Grail went with a group of Templars to Scotland in 1307[25]; others argue that it went to Spain; others yet argue the Templars found it, and it remains hidden with a greater yet undiscovered treasure.[26]

We'll return to these claims when we look more deeply at the idea of a lost treasure later on.

Lastly, a final theory suggests that the story of the Grail, rather than the Grail itself, is of importance, as the story may offer a coded description of the Ark of the Covenant.[27] We'll discuss the Ark of the Covenant in more depth shortly.

The Shroud of Turin

That brings us to the Shroud of Turin. Interestingly, at least one theory posits that the term 'Holy Grail' actually refers to the Shroud of Turin[28], but that is clearly a minority opinion.

As to what the Shroud of Turin itself is, however, there is much less controversy, as everyone seems to agree. While culturally it is presented as

the burial shroud of Jesus, most various dating methods place its origin in the middle ages.[29]

While experts can disagree with whether or not the cloth is, in fact, the burial shroud of Jesus of Nazareth, its place in folklore and church history is less up for debate. Multiple popes, in fact, have offered a blessing of the Shroud as a holy item and as "a reflection of the Gospel."[30]

The Shroud of Turin is perhaps more substantially connected to the Templars than the Holy Grail, in that there is more significant historic evidence that it was in their possession.

For instance, it is known that the shroud's first public display was in 1357, in Geoffrey of Charney's window[31]. Geoffrey of Charney was the nephew of Templar Geoffroi de Charney, who was burned at the stake with the last Grand Master Templar, Jacques De Molay.[32]

Templar historian Barbara Frale has also argued that the shroud was in the Templar's possession as early as 1204.[33]

Similarly, Templar paintings such as the Templecombe painting,[34] have been shown to be a copy of the Turin Shroud, and consequently can serve as evidence that the shroud was in Templar hands at the time of the Templecombe painting.[35] The painting has been dated to 1280, offering further evidence that the shroud may be older than currently accepted dating gives it credit.[36]

The Ark of the Covenant

That brings us to the final of the big three relics, the Ark of the Covenant.

Originally described in the biblical account of Exodus, the Ark of the Covenant is the large wooden box in which the Ten Commandments were kept during the Israelite flight from Egypt. Numerous theories exist as to what may have happened to the AArk, but several of them include the Templars, and we'll examine those theories briefly here, as each has relevance to the idea of hidden Templar treasure.

A wide array of potential locations for the Ark of the Covenant have been discussed (including Mount Nebo, in Israel; Ethiopia; Southern Africa; quite a few places across Europe; the United States; even Egypt), but here we'll discuss a few theories that involve the Templar's involvement with the Ark of the Covenant.

One theory maintains that the Templars knew where the Ark was, at a location in Ethiopia. Graham Hancock, in his book *The Sign and the Seal*, for instance, proposes that the Templars uncovered secrets of the Masons when they were occupying Solomon's temple, and that knowledge led them to the Ark.[37] To bolster this theory, in June 2009 the Orthodox Church of

Ethiopia announced that they had the Ark and were going to reveal it. Sadly, the Ark was never shown, so it's hard to draw too much from this.[38]

Of course, Hancock's book also mentions another possible location for the Ark of the Covenant, again courtesy of the Templars: Chartes Cathedral, in France. Author Louis Charpentier particularly favors this theory – that the Templars found the Ark and moved it to the cathedral.[39]

Similar theories involving the Templars abound, and a brief overview will suffice here. Author Karen Ralls, for instance, believed the Templars took the Ark from Jerusalem to France, and it has since been moved from France to the United States.[40] Other prominent historical authors believe that the Templars had a hand in moving the Ark from Jerusalem to either Rome (where it may have burned)[41] or even to England.[42]

The Lost Account Logs

That brings us to the lost account logs, how they relate to Templar banking and accounting, and how they may relate to the relics and other lost treasures. You'll recall that central to many of the theories of lost Templar treasure is the notion that all the Templar accounting went missing when the Templars were shut down and the Knights rounded up.

The Templars had an extraordinary banking and accounting system in their heyday, which we'll cover in more detail in the next chapter, and had the account logs been found, they might well have told a fascinating story about all of the properties and prize possessions under Templar control throughout the Middle Ages. Moreover, they might well have contained clues to where these treasures and items of tremendous value were stored, and how.

Alas, the account logs were never found.

Banking System of the Knights Templar

Wondering about the lost account logs serves as a wonderful introduction to the intricate and well-developed banking system the Knights quickly developed in their 200-year reign. In fact, it's not an understatement to say that without their successfully developed banking system, there's no way they could have risen to prominence the way they did.

In particular, their banking system gave them several advantages and additional prestige over other orders of knights and helped them stand out. First, it helped them get around church rules on wealth and interest that other orders had not yet been able to sidestep, and they culled favor with the church to a degree that others did not achieve. Second, their banking system contributed directly to their rapid expansion and development of wealth, as they immediately stood out as a much safer option for wealthy benefactors and joining knights. Third, this rapid expansion of wealth and improved standing also allowed them to rapidly expand their power and their property, such that France's King Philip IV had very good reason to believe that they could end his reign, should they so choose, which likely contributed to his proactive attack on them.

Working Around Church Rules

At the time of the Templars, the Church prohibited the issuing of credit, but the Templars found an innovative way around this. They charged rent instead – which, though the same in practice, was different in language. As Marzuni put it, “Since they weren't allowed to charge interest, they charged rent instead.”[43]

In practice, this meant pilgrims would deposit valuables such as deeds, gold, or other prized possessions with the Templar house nearest them before they began on their journey. In return, they were given a letter describing the holdings they had placed in trust, which they then carried with them on the pilgrimage. As they traveled, they would then stop at other

Templar houses along the route, where they could withdraw from their account, so to speak, based on what was written in the original letter. This, in turn, meant the pilgrims didn't have to carry their valuables, and as a result were a bit safer, and in exchange, the Templars were able to charge a holding fee, allowing them to increase their power.

As more and more pilgrims took advantage of this Templar system, it also helped insulate the Order from church regulations, which – as we noted previously – forbade such lending practices. Quite quickly, however, the Templars became so big and so useful that the Church looked the other way and ignored such financial transgressions.

This innovation and creativity may have helped endear them to philanthropic nobles, who in turn gave large gifts. Other nobles (once they had a male heir to their estate) joined the Templars themselves in the cause of the Crusades.

Rapid Expansion of Wealth

The Templars gained additional wealth from new members. As new knights joined the Templars, they were forced to take an oath of poverty. At that time, they often (especially if they were wealthy) donated large amounts of their original holdings, or if they had no male heir, they sometimes donated everything they had.

The Templars also gained additional finances because nobles who were not joining the Templars nonetheless trusted the Order and the wealth and power they already represented, and so if such a noble were making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, they frequently entrusted their holdings to the Templars – who in turn, as previously mentioned, worked around Church rules to charge a little bit of “rent,” meaning that even if all of the holdings were returned to the noble upon their return from their journey, the Templars still profited from the deal.

And if the noble didn't return? Frequently those holdings were bequeathed to the Order. Before long, the majority of the Knights Templar operation was devoted not to battle, but to controlling their economic interests. Again, they were too large for the Church to chastise, and so the Templar empire and influence continued to expand.

Rapid Expansion of Property and Power

In fact, by 1150 – only thirty years in – the mission of the Order itself had changed from one of protecting and guarding those on their pilgrimage, to one of protecting those pilgrims' possessions.

Through the letters of credit issued to pilgrims and the generosity of nobles – both those joining the Order and those going on their pilgrimages – the Templars continued to gain, not only gold and other valuables, but also property and in influence. As noted earlier, they quickly became too large for the Church to take too close an interest in their financial status, as the Church needed their services too, and they had the additional advantage of being the most respected of the Orders of the day, meaning nobles wishing to do something pious were most likely to donate to the Templars.

Consider that by the time they began to falter, they already owned the entire island of Cyprus, and you have some idea just how powerful the Templars became.[44] All of the historical evidence, including the Knights' role in the coup on Cyprus that resulted in King Henry II abdicating the throne, and the debt to the Templars that King Philip inherited upon taking the throne from his father in France, show that by the time the Templars fell, Kings across Europe had good reason to fear them.[45]

Account Logs Lost

Of course, when the Templars fell, much of the information that might have told us more about their holdings, power, and wealth was lost – including their famed account logs. Without the account logs, it's impossible to know exactly what riches and titles the Templars held at the time of their disbanding, and given that when Philip and others began rounding up the Templars on charges of heresy, the vast majority of the Knights disappeared, it's impossible to know what treasures and valuables were lost, or where.

What we do know is still substantial. For instance, we know they supported up to 4,000 horses at a time, they owned huge swathes of land (both in the Middle East and in Europe), they built castles and churches, they ran

vineyards and farms, they had extensive import/export and manufacturing arms, they ran an extensive fleet of ships, and they were for all intents and purposes Europe's largest standing army at several points – but that doesn't mean there isn't more information, including quite relevant specifics, that was lost with the account logs.

Even without the account logs, there are plenty of things we still know about how the Templar banking system worked – but with the account logs, we could say definitely what treasures the Templars held, and were they were kept, when their empire fell.

Of course, the absence of that information has led to many theories, which is a tremendous part of the mystique surrounding the Templars.

Without the account logs, we can only theorize as to whether or not the Templars held the Holy Grail at the time of their dissolution, or the Ark of the Covenant at the time of their dissolution. Without records, we can only guess whether or not the Templars held vast hidden treasures, gold, and other priceless artifacts. And without the account logs, it's even more difficult to speculate as to what treasures might have gone with whom – and where – when Philip and others came for the Knights Templar.

All of this complicates the hunt for their lost treasures, and we'll look at that in more detail in the coming two chapters.

Knights Templar Treasures: Legend or Reality?

That brings us back to the possibility of Templar treasures, still hidden away. This may well be the biggest reason the Templars have remained so popular in our current mythology, and it not only offers an array of fun mysteries, but also a countless number of avenues for further investigation. Let's investigate further and see what more we can uncover.

We'll begin by looking again and a little more closely at the circumstances surrounding the fall of the Templar empire, and consider just how many Knights may have fled and or otherwise disappeared at that time, taking their secrets with them. Second, we'll take a closer look at those account logs, and some theories about what sorts of information may have been included in them, as well as a few ideas as to where the account logs may have gone.

Third, we'll look at some of the scholarly interpretations of the historical likelihood for lost treasures, to help put some of the puzzle pieces in perspective. Fourth, having taken an overview of some of the scholarly positions, we'll begin cataloging some of the more common current theories as to where and how treasure may have disappeared.

We'll look briefly at one of the most common theoretical landing spots for a Templar treasure: Nova Scotia. We'll also apply the same questions we ask about Nova Scotia in determining the likelihood of a treasure being located (or ever found) in a few other potential treasure locations.

Lastly, then, we'll return to our original question: Is the Templar treasure a legend, or a reality?

Disappearing Knights

As we've noted previously, when Philip began rounding up the Templar Knights in France, and as they were arraigned on similar charges of heresy

in other locations, only a small percentage of the Knights were captured and tried. Instead, the vast majority seem to have disappeared. Let's look a little bit at some of the numbers.

At the time of Philip's attack on the Templars, there were at least 3,000 Knights in France alone. Up to 150 of them were tried, and this only accounted for somewhere in the neighborhood of 5% of the Knights in France. At that time, the Templars controlled 15,000 Templar houses across Europe and the Middle East, as well as a fleet of ships, and numbered in the tens of thousands of men. Even the official dissolution of the Knights Templar via the papal bull cannot have accounted for what happened to all these men.

We have stories for some; in Portugal, for instance, they changed their name to the Order of Christ and continued to do business. In Iberia, they were officially swallowed by the Order of Montessa, and elsewhere in Europe their assets were officially ordered over to the Knights Hospitaller. But how many Knights, and what treasures, might have fallen through the cracks, either by choice or by accident?

So where might all of those Knights who are unaccounted for have disappeared to? It's likely that some of them simply remained at home, and somehow weren't swept up in the mania, whether through courtesy, their connections, or dumb luck. But it seems likely that others would have left their homes and fled to places where they were less likely to be recognized as a Templar – and consequently less likely to be arrested and tried for heresy.

There are a few theories as to where those Knights may have gone, and we'll address them each when we start looking more deeply at theories as to where treasure might have gone.

The following are some of the most highly considered theoretical locations of a Knights Templar treasure:

- Nova Scotia, via the Templars

- Scotland, via the Templars or the Freemasons
- France, via the Templars or the Freemasons
- Portugal, via the Templars or the Freemasons
- Spain, via the Templars or the Freemasons
- Germany, via the Templars or the Freemasons
- Elsewhere in Europe, via the Templars or the Freemasons
- United States, via the Freemasons
- Egypt, via the Templars or the Freemasons
- Elsewhere in Northern Africa, via the Templars or the Freemasons
- Israel, via the Templars or the Freemasons
- Elsewhere in the Middle East, via the Templars or the Freemasons

While a few have theorized other potential resting places for Templar treasures, those locations in the list above are by far the most commonly posited locations, and likewise seem most plausible.

Lost Account Logs

That brings us back to the lost account logs, then – and what information researchers have theorized was in the logs, as well as speculation as to where the logs might have gone.

First, it stands to reason that the account logs suffered the same fate as the Knights who were responsible for them. If the logs were overseen by Knights who were captured, tried, and executed, for instance, it seems likely that the account logs were simply destroyed. That said, however, we've already established that the number of Knights tried and executed was a very small percentage of the total Knights, so it seems unlikely that the account logs were lost in that way.

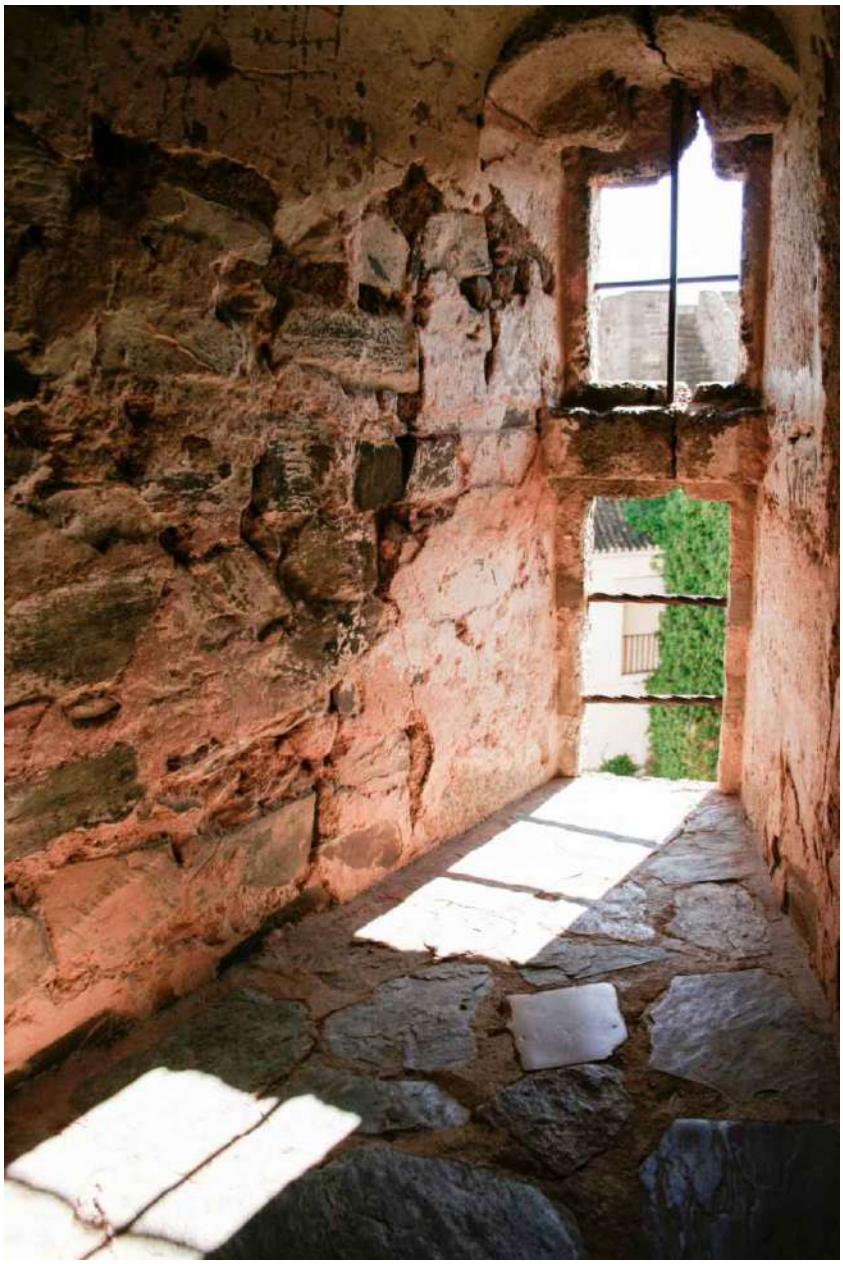
As a result, it seems more likely that whichever Knights were responsible for the account logs likely took them with them when they disappeared, which brings us to the conclusion that the account logs likely went to one of the locations in which the runaway Knights resettled – so we're left in a remarkable conundrum. These are important records, and those in charge of them would have known that. The account logs are likely needed to know exactly what treasures the Templars controlled at the time – and yet the records may well have gone into hiding with the treasures they describe.

As a result, the account logs are a source of rich and varied conjecture. Some scholars have suggested that they were taken on by the Freemasons, who had begun to form in the later years of the Templars. Others have suggested they were destroyed – to protect Templar secrets. It's our suspicion, however, that they were taken with the hidden treasures that remain to this day undiscovered – but this is a matter of theory and conjecture. Before we begin chasing down that lead, let's first consider what information might have been in the logs.

To begin with, we know the logs contained a list of valuable possessions, and it seems likely they also contained information about where the items were stored, who the benefactor was, and possibly a description of the item or holding. In essence, the account logs were at the very least an inventory of all the riches held by the Templars, and so whoever held the account logs likely had a fair claim to whatever treasures were listed in the logs, especially after the Templars fell.

And so finding the account logs would be a tremendous first step in finding whatever treasures may still exist, as it would help provide a historical context – a starting point, so to speak – for those treasures. Hopefully the logs have not been buried away with the treasures themselves.

Scholarly Interpretation?



But as to those treasures – do scholars even agree on their existence, or is this merely a pipe dream of conspiracy addicts and treasure hounds? As rich as the Templars once were, does a Templar treasure even still exist?

On that point, scholars seem pretty divided. Some argue that vast riches and wealth once controlled by the Templars have yet to be found. Others argue that everything once controlled by Templars has since been divided and subdivided, time and time again, so it is all in the hands of private individuals. Most scholars argue that the truth is somewhere in between, that some of the Templar treasure fell into private hands, but some of it may still be missing, unaccounted for – and waiting for someone to unearth it from its hiding place.

We can begin by considering the rich legends and stories of the Templar treasure, as discussed previously. Clearly, there are lots of researchers, scholars, investigators, and authors who believe that the Templar treasure is still missing, or at the very least, the possibility of such makes a great story..

As you can see, especially if you do more digging (and we highly encourage you to make use of the reference section to address other questions you may still have) regardless of your position, you can likely find at least a few scholars who will support a version of your interpretation of history. The treasure could very well exist – or not

Some of the Most Common Theories

Keeping that in mind, let's look at some of the most common theories:

- The Templar treasure never existed.
- The Templar treasure existed, but fell into private hands when the Knights fell from power.
- The Templar treasure existed, and some fell into private hands, but some remained in the hands of a shadow Templar organization.
- Parts of the Templar treasure were ferreted away to different locations as the Knights went into hiding with the account logs.

- The entirety of the Templar treasure remained in shadow Templar hands, and remained in one location.

Let's look at each of those theories in turn, and then we can better evaluate how likely each might seem; we'll rank each on a scale of 1-9 (in honor of the nine original Knights), with 1 being least likely and 9 most likely.

1. The Templar treasure never existed. This theory posits that by the time Philip came for the Knights, what remained of the Templar treasures had already been spent or otherwise worked its way into private hands, and was no longer under the control of the organization. Very few people believe in this theory, however, because of how suddenly the Templars were forced to disband and disappear with such haste. The Templars did not have years and years of slow decline, which might have made such a possibility more likely. [Likelihood: 1 Knight, as it wasn't as if the Templars fell over time, or had the opportunity to squander their wealth before being disbanded.]

2. The Templar treasure existed, but fell into private hands when the Knights fell from power. This theory suggests that when Philip came for the Knights, he (or other powerful people) knew where the Templar treasure was held, and at the time of the mass arrests, the treasure was seized. This, too, is a theory taken by few, as it seems likely that if the treasure fell into private hands, at some point in the hundreds of years since we would have heard of it. Philip wasn't exactly modest, and such a haul would have been something almost anyone would think worth bragging about. [Likelihood: 2 Knights, especially given the small percentage of Templars who were rounded up. The likelihood that Philip (or anyone else) could have gotten their hands on the treasure seems slim.]

3. The Templar treasure existed, and some fell into private hands, but some of the treasure remained hidden, courtesy of a shadow Templar organization. This theory makes more sense to most scholars and historians familiar with the period, as, while many Templars were arrested, most were not. It’s reasonable to think that in the chaos, some of the treasures were likely lost and/or fell into private hands, but it also seems likely that some remained hidden with those who escaped. Additionally, some of the

Templars arrested, tried, and executed were elder Templars, making it more likely that at least some had access to the account logs and information about various treasures, which they may have tried to barter for their freedom. [Likelihood: 7 Knights, especially as Even if the vast majority of the Templars were brave, strong men, even one Knight with knowledge of the treasures and desire to preserve his own life would have been enough for this scenario to have taken place.]

4. Parts of the Templar treasure were ferreted away to different locations as the Knights went into hiding with the account logs. This theory, too, has its fair share of fans, as again, the vast majority of the Order were not arrested, and it's likely that many of the most powerful Templars – those who would know the locations of treasures, escaped with what treasure they were able to take with them. Indeed, smaller treasures would have been more easily transported and hidden. [Likelihood: 8 Knights. While theory #3 almost certainly also took place, the sheer quantity of Knights – and the extent of their powers and treasures – makes it almost certain that Templar treasure was ferreted away during the raids.]

5. The entirety of the Templar treasure remained in shadowy Templar hands, all in one location. While there are certainly proponents of this theory, when we consider just how much treasure the Templars would have been responsible for at the time of their official disbanding, it is unlikely that it could have been kept together unless a) very few people knew about it, b) none of those people were captured, and c) the treasure didn't need to be moved at any time when the Order was under great scrutiny, as moving what must have been such a large treasure would never have escaped attention. [Likelihood: 1 Knight. As noted above, the number of things that would have had to occur for this to take place simply seem too great – though it's certainly the basis for some pieces of fiction.]

As you can see, arguments can be made for each theory, though some are certainly stronger than others. For instance, theory #1, which posits that the Templars had no treasure left by the time they were disbanded, seems incredibly unlikely, given that an organization as large as the Templars would require significantly more time to erode all of its resources. When

the Templars fell, their organization was still rather strong. Their strength at the time, after all, was part of why Philip feared them. Similarly, theory #5, which suggests that the entirety of the treasure remained together under the control of a shadowy Templar organization, likewise seems improbable, given the upheaval when Philip had arrested what Knights he could. It's unlikely that amidst that chaos, such large-scale organization was still possible.

Possible Treasure Location: Nova Scotia, Canada

One frequently suggested location for a Templar treasure is in Nova Scotia, on Oak Island. As the theory goes, a group of Templars escaped France with 18 boats just as Philip issued the order for the Knights Templar's capture and questioning. While many scholars suggest the boats headed to Scotland, others say they made the journey across the Atlantic to Nova Scotia.[46]

This theory is also mentioned in the film *National Treasure* (2004), which has kept it at the forefront of popular culture ever since[47], and is a theory we'll address in more depth in the following chapter – when we'll look especially at whether or not Nova Scotia is a plausible location for the Templar treasure, and if so, where and how might it be hidden.

Other Possible Treasure Locations

Let's return briefly to our previous list, so we can consider the theory behind each potential location.

3. Nova Scotia, via the Templars
4. Scotland, via the Templars or the Freemasons
5. France, via the Templars or the Freemasons
6. Portugal, via the Templars or the Freemasons
7. Spain, via the Templars or the Freemasons
8. Germany, via the Templars or the Freemasons
9. Elsewhere in Europe, via the Templars or the Freemasons

10. United States, via the Freemasons
11. Egypt, via the Templars or the Freemasons
12. Elsewhere in Northern Africa, via the Templars or the Freemasons
13. Israel, via the Templars or the Freemasons
14. Elsewhere in the Middle East, via the Templars or the Freemasons

Let’s look next at Scotland. As mentioned previously, the idea is that a group of Templars escaped just before Philip's order in France, and with a group of 18 boats escaped to Scotland.[48] From there, there are several locations that are potential Templar treasure locations, which we'll also address a little more in the next chapter.

There are likewise rumors that Templar treasure might still be hidden in France. After all, as we noted previously, in France only a small number of the Knights were actually arrested, questioned, and charged; and the vast majority of the Knights may have been able to simply lay low if they chose. As a result, more than one researcher has speculated that some of the Templar treasure may have remained hidden in plain sight.

Similarly, as the Templars simply changed their name in Portugal, becoming known as the Knights of the Christ, rather than completely disbanding. Thus, Portugal has been another proposed location for Templar treasure. In Spain/Iberia, too, they did not completely disband, but rather were swallowed by the Order of Montessa. Isn't it possible that some of their treasure was likewise obscured with the name changes?

In Germany, less is known of what became of the Templars, but there's a rich tradition of hidden treasures in what became Prussia and then Germany, especially given the number of medieval castles and the rich history of the Black Forest region. More than a few scholars and researchers have hinted that some of the treasures of lore in the region may be in some way traced back to the Templars.

Other locations have also been put forth as potential treasure locations across Europe, but there seems to be less to go on in each case, so we are not including them here. If this is something that interests you, however,

there are plenty of resources available, and with some good close reading, other places may strike you as potential treasure locations.

Of course, other theories have suggested that the Templar treasure, or at least part of it, may not have remained in Nova Scotia or Europe at all, but rather, courtesy of the Freemasons, ended up in America. While these theories have been hinted at in numerous bits of pop culture, no clear theory seems to have won out. Instead, multiple theories (involving the Freemasons, the Illuminati, and other secret organizations – with competing claims involving the founders of America) seem to have their own followings. Where good theory devolves into conspiracy theory, however, is less clear, so if this something you choose to investigate further, tread carefully.

Other creative theories as to what may have happened with the Templar treasures also persist. For instance, given the influence the Templars once had in the Middle East, and the number of houses they once ran, more than one scholar has theorized that Templar treasures may have fallen into Muslim hands, either intentionally or accidentally, and as a result, ended up in northern Africa. Most commonly, these theories have the treasures ending up in Egypt, with other collections of holy treasures, but some scholars do imagine the Templar treasure in other locations across northern Africa.

Similarly, some scholars and researchers have suggested that Templar treasure may have remained in Israel or elsewhere in the Middle East, either as Templar influence retreated in the later Crusades, or after their dissolution, taken there by Knights still well connected in the area. They may be in Muslim hands. This, too, fits with many other theories surrounding some of the holy treasures and relics that were at one time in the Templar treasure

We know that, officially, the Knights Templar who were not charged and executed were ordered to hand over property of the Templars to either the Hospitallers (via the papal bull) or King Philip (by Philip's orders). But the Templars had long been a secretive organization, and were well-organized.

Given that they had no history with the Hospitallers, and that their history with Philip was less than amicable, it's entirely possible that some treasure was secreted away, stashed, and hid.

Legend or Reality?

As we noted, scholars cannot seem to agree on what may have happened to the Templar treasures. We don't have proof of much, and yet common sense does give us a few starting points. It seems clear, for instance, that the Templars still held treasure at the time of their dissolution, and we know that only a small percentage of the Knights were captured, tried, and

executed. Consequently, it's likely that at least some of the treasures disappeared with the Knights that went into hiding or fled their homelands.

As a result, it seems likely that the Templar treasure is part legend and part reality – and this makes it a tantalizing mystery. It could be real. It could be found.

On the Trail of The Knights Templar Treasure Today

Since we've shown that it's likely that some of the treasure was saved, we will proceed under the following assumptions:

- The Templar treasure is real, rather than a legend, and still exists today; and
- The Templar treasure is hidden, and still waiting to be found.

Let's look at potential locations, and consider where such a treasure might be hidden.

Nova Scotia

Oak Island, Nova Scotia, Canada - By Richard McCully - https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=25260436

Let's start with Oak Island, Nova Scotia, as this is one of the potential treasure locations that has most excited treasure hunters for years.

One of the most popular Templar theories suggests that a group of Knights were somehow given advance warning of Philip's raids in France in 1307. They were able to load up a group of 18 galley boats in La Rochelle, and sail out of trouble. This theory was first posited by *The Holy Blood and The Holy Grail*, but has been furthered by numerous scholars since.[49]

Scholars disagree on where those boats went, but the two main theories suggest that they either sailed to Scotland – or to the new world, landing in Oak Island, Nova Scotia.

Strange as it may be to imagine Templars sailing across the unknown Atlantic in the early 14th century and landing in Nova Scotia, there's actually quite a bit of evidence to suggest that's exactly where the Templar treasure may have landed.

Oak Island has long been a source of mystery and speculation, rumored to hold numerous treasures – and the Templars are a commonly presumed source of that treasure. Let's look at Oak Island a little more closely.

Treasure hunters know Oak Island well – particularly a location on the small island called the Money Pit, which has been excavated numerous times and yet still seems to hold secrets.[50] In fact, books describing theories of treasure on Oak Island go back as far as 1863 – with somewhere in the neighborhood of 60-80 books now containing at least references to the place.[51] Even the History Channel has addressed the idea of treasure on Oak Island, having run several different mini-series related to the topic in recent years.

Author Steven Sora and others have theorized that the Money Pit was originally dug by the Knights Templar, and that the 90-foot coded stone

found there was part of an elaborate system of ciphers and codes detailing how to unearth the treasure.[52] As their theory goes, Oak Island may have been the final Templar resting place for the Holy Grail, the Ark of the Covenant, or more. Dennis King makes a similar argument, except he suggests that rather than the Templars bringing the treasure to Oak Island, their descendant Freemasons did.[53]

In any case, the arguments for treasure on Oak Island are many. Stories surrounding the Money Pit, especially, date back as far as the late 1790's, when a settler named McGinnis found a softer spot of ground and small depression and, with the help of a few others, began digging. As a result of local superstitions, however, this first trio abandoned the dig after only 30 feet of excavation.[54]

Through the years that followed, other groups took up the excavation, each making slightly more progress and adding to the lore with their explorations and findings. Following the McGinnis dig, the next efforts were by the Onslow Company, who managed to dig to a depth of 90 feet, during which time they found other signs – such as log layers, coconut fibers, charcoal, and putty – of work that didn't make sense on the island unless something had been buried there by outsiders. Somewhere around 80 or 90 feet down, they also found a large stone full of coded symbols.[55] Unfortunately, while they were in the process of excavating, the pit flooded.

The Truro Company tried next. While they were able to supplement the Onslow Company findings – reportedly even finding a spruce layer somewhere near 100 feet deep, followed by oak, some metal, more spruce, and then 7 feet of clay – they too had issues with flooding.

An interesting discovery by the Truro Company was the existence of five “finger drains” – a section of beach nearby had been excavated and a series of layers, as well as these five drains, were discovered. It's not clear what else they may have found, as little record of their expedition seems to have survived, but a tunnel is also mentioned.[56]

In 1861, the Money Pit claimed its first known fatalities, as a group known as the Oak Island Association had troubles with equipment. An unidentified individual died when a boiler exploded. During the course of their work, the original chamber also seems to have collapsed – a potential booby trap protecting the treasure beneath.[57] Following explorations seemed only minimally more fruitful – though one group found a piece of parchment containing either "vi" or "wi" on it, as well as what might have been three exit tunnels.[58] Further excavations of course continued, but with little to show for them except occasional worker deaths.[59]

Numerous excavations and explorations have been made in the years since, but nothing new has been found – though if the original treasure chamber did indeed collapse because of a booby trap, this also makes some sense.

Instead, scholars have mostly focused on what is already known about the Money Pit. First, several researchers have suggested that the original chamber may have been booby trapped to flood and collapse, making it nearly impossible to determine what may have been stashed away. The coconut fibers, in particular, are interesting, as coconut palms do not grow in Canada – suggesting that coconuts were brought to the island somehow.[60] Similarly, while numerous experts have looked at the stone retrieved from the pit, no one has been able to decipher it, and so whatever secrets it may have offered remain unknown.[61] Complicating matters, the location of the stone is no longer known.[62]

As with any treasure theory, there are also plenty of experts willing to say that there may be natural explanations for the cavern, the Money Pit, and the salt water flooding, meaning these indications may be intriguing, but not as indicative of a potential treasure location as many believe.

Let's look more closely at the possibility that the cavern, the Money Pit, and the salt water flooding were all naturally caused. We should begin with the accounts of the cavern that were never substantiated: neither the five finger drains nor the early claimed tunnel have ever been proven to exist by later explorers, including multiple geologists.[63] Similarly, tests run by more recent explorers, including a scientific study conducted by the Woods Hole

Oceanographic Institution, seem to support the idea that any flooding in the cavern was not the result of booby traps, as early expeditions suspected, but rather natural tidal pressures interacting with the island's freshwater tables. Dye tests run in 1995 seemed to confirm this, and the five finger drains have likewise been argued not to be representative of a booby trap, but instead the remnants of salt works on the island from years prior.[64] Similarly, the ease with which the limestone bedrock of the island erodes would explain the frequent cave-ins and other issues excavators and other explorers had. Geologic expeditions in more recent years have shown that the island itself is littered with underground caverns and caves, making it more likely that the Money Pit was a natural land feature – the result of a sinkhole.

Furthermore, if the Money Pit is simply an old sinkhole, the softer materials that filled the sinkhole back in would make it appear as though it had been recently dug, as some early expeditions claimed. Accordingly, the wood and other things found in the pit may well have blown there via various storms, and then decomposed at different rates, resulting in the appearance of wooden layers. Similar sinkhole structures have been found in the area, leading many to suspect that the Money Pit is a natural feature. Of course, this still doesn't explain the coconut palm fibers.[65]

There are many who believe that Nova Scotia may have been a resting place for the Templar treasure, including such priceless treasures as the Ark of the Covenant and the Holy Grail.[66] Still, plenty of researchers have serious doubts.

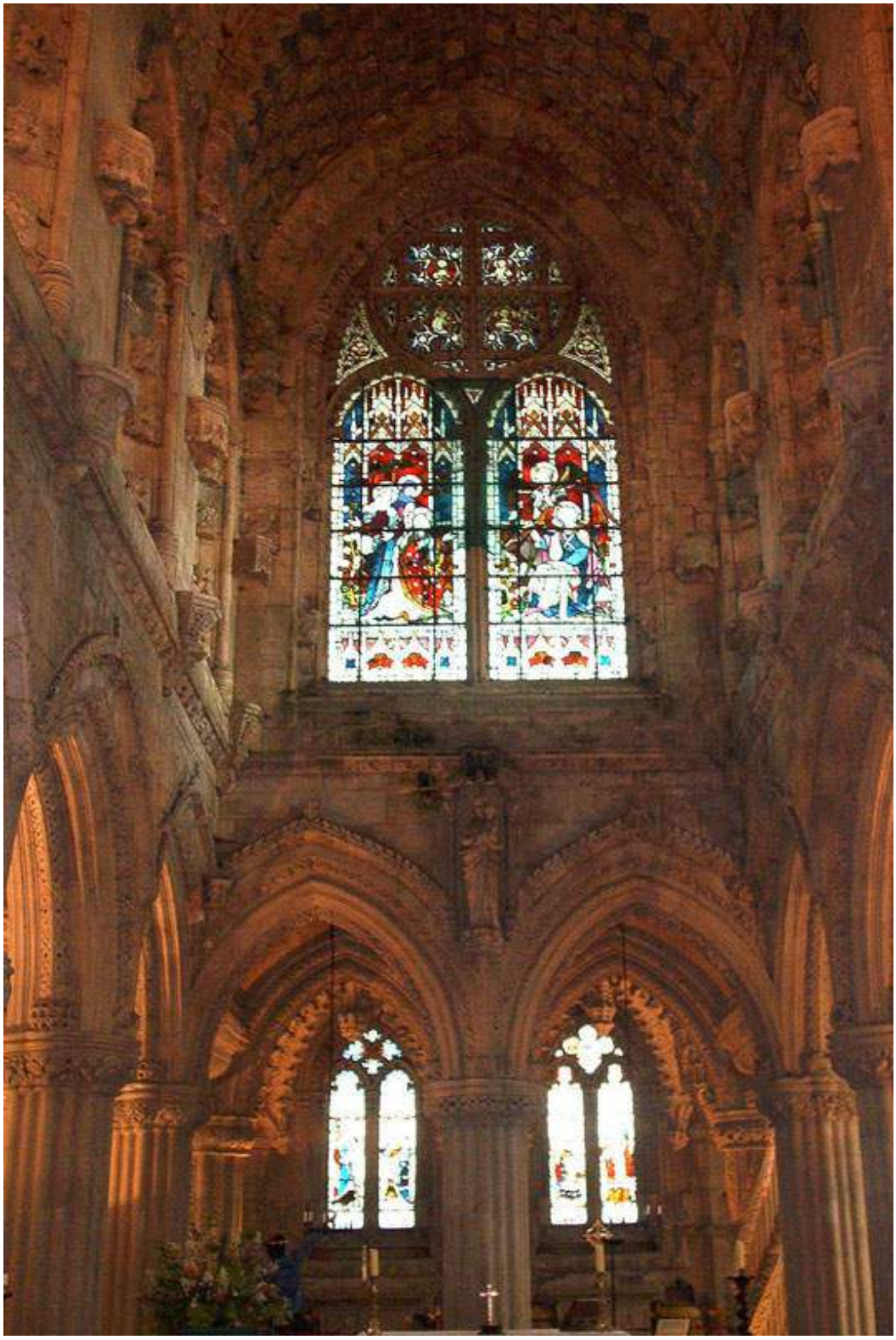
That brings us to other problem with Nova Scotia as a theoretical resting place for the Templars: not everyone believes Nova Scotia is a plausible destination for the eighteen galleys. As noted historian Helen Nicholson argues,

> “The Templars did have ships to carry personnel, pilgrims and supplies across the Mediterranean between the West and East and back, but if the Hospital after 1312 is any guide they did not have more than four galleys (warships) and few other ships, and if they

> needed more they hired them. They certainly could not spare ships to indulge in world exploration ... [T]he records of the port of La Rochelle show that the Templars were exporting wine by ship. This was not a fleet in any modern sense: again, those would have been transport vessels rather than warships, and the Templars probably hired them as they needed them, rather than buying their own. ... The ships would have been very small by modern standards, too shallow in draught and sailing too low in the water to be able to withstand the heavy waves and winds of the open Atlantic, and suited for use only in the relatively shallow waters of the continental shelf. What was more, they could not carry enough water to be at sea for long periods."[67]

She's not alone in that assessment, either. Numerous other scholars and historians have argued, instead, that the eighteen galleys were much better equipped to sail to Scotland – which is where we'll search next.

Scotland



Rosslyn chapel, Scotland

https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=554387

Many scholars and researchers believe that if the Templars did sail to Scotland, and their treasure remained there, then the most likely place for it would be Rosslyn Chapel. Though Rosslyn wasn't built until 1446, designed by Sir William Sinclair (or St Clair, depending on the source), it was built in a way that incorporated a great deal of Freemasonry architecture. As the Freemasons are believed to have descended from the Templar tradition[68] many believe the Freemasons – or at least a portion of the Freemasons – kept the Templar secrets.

Of additional relevance to Rosslyn's connection with the Templars is that Sir William Sinclair came from a family connected to the Templars, and Rosslyn is supposedly designed or at least in part based on the designs of Solomon's Temple – which, as we know, was the Templars' first base.

Similarly, the chapel is also well known for two other major pieces of theory. First, Rosslyn is unusual in the number of pre-Christian carvings, many of which seemingly connect to a more pagan history. Some scholars suspect this may suggest the Templars, in that the Templars were sometimes seen as a body on the fringe of Church organization and doctrine. Secondly, scholars also believe that Rosslyn was originally designed as a much larger building, and what was finally built was initially intended only as a choral nave.

Some scholars believe that the Templars were most interested in the mysteries of Solomon's Temple – and treasure – and not their stated original aim of protecting Christian pilgrims. These people believe that at the very least portions, if not all of the treasures, were moved to Scotland (or elsewhere) after the arrests in France. This supposition is supported by bits of evidence that the previously mentioned eighteen galleys were real, and they may well have been loaded with treasure, and they may well have landed in Scotland. In particular, it's believed that Gerard of Villiers led the expedition – though from there, theories vary a little. Eighteenth century author George Frederick Johnson, for instance, claimed he had evidence of the Templars in Scotland,[69] but one of his men claimed the Scottish landing of the Templars took place on the Isle of Mull. No one seems to quite agree

on how the Templar treasure might have ended up at Rosslyn – only that it seems like a likely site if it did end up in Scotland, which seems probable.

Other scholars have suggested Robert the Bruce was involved in the Templar landing in Scotland. As the theory goes, the exiled Templars may have helped the Scots fight the English at Bannockburn, as various oral histories of that battle have agreed that the Scots were aided by a force of unknown fighters. It seems possible that those unknown fighters were Templars.

Of course, even if we don't buy the Bannockburn tale, as some don't, it is clear that the Templars had a presence in Scotland even before they officially fell, as Midlothian was a Templar house from early on. Furthermore, Midlothian is relatively close to Rosslyn[70] – another point that many researchers say suggests the likelihood that Templars may have hid treasure there.

Even more interesting, one of the designer Sinclair's ancestors, Prince Henry Sinclair, is believed by some to have possibly been one of the first to sail to the New World, evidence of which is available in both the Zeno Narrative (a map depicting the travels of a Prince Zichmi, believed to be Prince Henry by some scholars) and in some of the plants depicted at Rosslyn – plants from the New World that weren't yet known in Europe when Rosslyn was built. Of course, not all scholars agree with that interpretation of Sinclair's past – but enough do to make it a compelling and interesting possibility.

Additionally, quite a few of the carvings in the Rosslyn chapel point to Templar lore, in addition to what seem to be Templar graves in and around the chapel. Some scholars even suggest that carvings around the church are a coded Templar message, but again, other scholars disagree.

In any case, many treasure hunters and lore lovers agree with at least some of the speculation – enough that thousands and thousands of people visit Rosslyn each year. If you choose to examine the lore of Rosslyn further, there are certainly plenty of resources available.

France

A stone cross and village of Couvertoirade, France

If not Nova Scotia or Scotland, another good possible location for the Templar treasure is actually, surprisingly, France – where many of the Templars were when Philip ordered their capture.

Quite a few scholars agree that one of the reason Philip felt threatened by the Templars was because he knew of their interest in acquiring more power and land – and creating their own nation state, similar to what they had in Cyprus (which was now lost) – in the south of France. They were looking at the possibility of creating their own state, similar to what the Teutons had done in Prussia, or the Hospitallers in Rhodes.[71]

As Jean Markdale and others have discussed, there are quite a few scholars and researchers who suggest that as a result, most of the Templar treasure was in France when the Templars officially fell. And while it's possible that treasure made it out on the eighteen galleys, it's just as likely that it remained in France, hidden. This is supported at least in part by the idea that most of the Templars who were captured and confessed were older Templars, and may have chosen to plead guilty to heresy partly to protect their brothers in the Order who were still in France, in hiding, with the treasures.[72]

Markdale and others make a pretty compelling case that the Templar treasure may have been hidden at Gisors (a town connected to the origins of the Templars) at least at one point, if not still. Whether or not the treasure remains buried in the castle chambers there is a point of controversy, even among those who agree that it may have been there once.[73]

There are also quite a few other Templar locations in France that may work as potential treasure locations, but the argument made for Gisors is likely the most compelling of those sites.[74]The castle of Gisors was under the Knights Templar control between 1158 and 1160. Thereafter, Gisors would be Grand Master Jacques de Molay last prison.

Again, if this is a theory that interests you, there are many resources available for further research.

Northern Africa

Church of Saint George in Lalibela, Ethiopia

Some scholars believe that parts of the Templar treasure may have ended up in Northern Africa. Several have speculated that the Ark of the Covenant was moved to Ethiopia, this based partly on symbols found at the Chartres Cathedral, and partly on the history of Solomon's Temple, Herod's Temple, and other Holy Land sites.

In particular, the Church of Saint George, built in Lalibela, Ethiopia, is of interest to some of these scholars. Also known as Bet Giorgis, this church is just one of eleven large temples carved from rock in the area, but it's the one best connected with the Templars. One theory suggests that the Ark of the Covenant was partially responsible for the construction of the temple, because of a tool referred to as the Shamir Stone that is believed to have been placed in it. The Shamir stone is said to have magical powers to cut through rock without any noise. According to the theory, the temple was carved in the late 12th century and early 13th century (1187 to 1225) using the Shamir. It was when the Templars were at their strongest, and when the Holy Wars were raging, meaning that their construction may well have gone unnoticed at the time in Europe.

The extraordinary wonder of the Lalibela temples has led many to suspect that magic or divine intervention was partly responsible for their construction. Indeed, there are several mysteries. None of the rock or dirt that must have been excavated at the time anywhere is to be found near Lalibela, and there's also the simple reality that archaeological experts don't have any idea what sort of tools of the time would have made such fine work possible.

Given the Templars' many connections to divine relics, and their instinct for secrecy and mystery, some researchers have consequently picked the many mysteries of Lalibela and connected them to the secrets of the lost treasure, suspecting that if the Church of Saint George and other rock-carved temples of the area had a reputation for requiring magic or divine intervention in their construction, then the Templars may rightly have treasured such a site as a holy location – and a fitting one for at least some of their treasures.

As Graham Hancock notes:

> On the arch of the ceiling of the rock-hewn church of Saint Mary's...can be seen a stylized croix contained within a Star of David - a most unusual symbol in a Christian place of worship, but one to which it is known that the Knights Templar were particularly attached. Behind the arch...[is]a cloth-wrapped column said by the

> priests to have been engraved by King Lalibela himself with the secrets of how the rock-hewn churches were made... Another croix pattÄe is carved on a boulder on the outskirts of Axum, and several more can be found "in the ruins of King Kaleb's palace - a structure that could well have been still standing and inhabited in the thirteenth century."[75]

Other locations in Northern Africa have been discussed, including ancient Egyptian sites, such as the Pyramids, the Sphinx, and other sacred locations. Most of these theories go back to the Templars' descendants, the Freemasons, and suggest that either the Freemasons or Illuminati moved the treasure from the Middle East to other sacred or otherwise special sites in Northern Africa.

Several sacred sites have been suggested in Egypt, as according to some theories central Egypt is at the center of Earth's landmass.[76] As this explanation goes, the Templars had a connection to the Moroccan Moors, because of the Moors' involvement in the Holy Wars, and as a result, the Templars acquired sacred sites both in Egypt and Morocco.[77]

Some of these sites were lost from Templar control as the Holy Wars shifted away from Christian control, but not all were necessarily lost, even if the Templars may not have had the same control they once held in the region.

Some researchers suggest that Templar treasure may be located in locations across Africa as diverse as the Sphinx, many of the Pyramids, even in the vestiges of lost Nile gardens – or elsewhere in Egypt, Morocco, or Ethiopia, each of which saw Templar activity.[78] Much of these theories depend on what may have been hidden in the account logs, however, and so references to them are far more common in fictional accounts – where authors are permitted to guess and make suppositions about what connections might have been made in those logs. In scholarly research we see less discussion, because so much information from that time, when the Templars controlled vast swathes of the Middle East and even parts of Northern Africa, has been lost.

Middle East

Underground citadel and prison in Akko, Israel

Of course, it's also entirely possible that the treasures of the Holy Lands never actually left the Middle East. Numerous locations have been suggested as potential treasure sites, both historically sacred sites (such as Mt. Arafat, the Temple Mount, and other sites around Jerusalem) and sites that were used by the Templars, and there are far more references to Templar sites in the Middle East preserved in historical documents than references to Northern Africa holdings.

For instance, some scholars believe that the Templars left clues at Temple Mount and during their long stay at Solomon's Temple[79]. History has not always been kind to Jerusalem, and many of the sites that the Templars once held are now destroyed or heavily damaged. This means a wide array of clues may have been lost through the years, but the combination of the sites remaining and the availability of historical documents cataloging what

many of those sites once looked like gives us a much better idea of how the Templars worked when they controlled parts of Jerusalem and the Holy Lands.

For instance, Mt. Ararat is seen as a promising location because this is where the Ark of the Covenant originated. Given that the Templars found their first home in Solomon's Temple, the Ark was an important piece of tradition. Returning it to the sacred site from which it was born would have been natural – if it could be done in a way that would keep the Ark and other treasures safe.[80]

Mt. Ararat is a holy site in Christian tradition, but is also important in Islamic lore, and there is some suspicion among scholars that while the Templars fought against Islamic forces during the Crusades, they were not opposed to working with Muslims if it meant good business. A collection of suspected joint business ventures has been proposed by numerous scholars, even if it has not yet been definitively proven.

It is under the assumption that there was some collaboration that scholars look at Ararat. There are legends of caves in the area, and while many scholars, researchers, and treasure seekers have scoured the area previously (it's been connected with both Noah's Ark and the Ark of the Covenant, and as such has long appealed to adventurers seeking Judeo-Christian relics and artifacts), there's also evidence that Ararat has shifted in some ways over the millennia, meaning that some caves that once existed – or other passageways into the mountain – might have since been buried and lost.

The idea that there may have been collaboration between the Templars and Muslims on at least some level surrounds many of the theories of treasure still hidden on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem – otherwise, the Templars would have had no reason to leave the treasure behind when they left the Holy Lands. A few scholars theorize that the Templars may have needed to leave Jerusalem quickly when the Holy War was lost, and that treasures may have been accidentally or unintentionally left behind. However, in that case it seems unlikely that they would not have discovered by the Muslims retaking control of the city, in which case the Muslims probably would have

moved the valuables to a safer location. This, too, is frequently used as an argument for the likelihood of at least some Templar treasures being stored in Northern Africa, as it was a stronghold for Islamic forces at various points during the Holy Wars.

If this a thread you're interested in unraveling further, the following Templar sites are also worthy of investigation, though each requires a little more conjecture than some of the other sites proposed:

Israel: Knights Hall; Chateau Pelerin[81]
Syria: Chastel Blanc; Ruad; Tortosa[82]

It is known that the Templars made heavy use of Knights Hall during the Holy Wars. There and in Acre, long Templar tunnels have been found – without apparent use or reason. Was treasure buried there? Is treasure still buried there? Again, there does not seem to be any consensus, either among scholars, researchers, or treasure-seekers. Nor does there seem to be much information available about either tunnel.

Chateau Pelerin is likewise a mystery in many ways. Though we know it was once the Templars' strongest and largest castle, easily holding up to 4,000 Knights at a time, it fell in 1291.[83] Still, it remains standing, and so while it is unlikely that treasure remains there, it does offer many clues into the Templars that are not found elsewhere, as it's one of the best-preserved Templar castles.

Similarly, in Syria the number of sites surrounded by questions vastly outweigh the number of answers available to us. As Syria has only sporadically seen peace in the centuries since the Templars were officially disbanded, many historic sites are in ruins or worse, so reaching any sort of consensus or concrete conclusion on how the Templars used each site is nearly impossible.

Instead, we're left once more with conjecture, and the directions in which scholars and treasure-seekers have taken the few scraps of solid information

we do have makes it difficult, if not impossible, to differentiate between the static and the noise, so to speak.

There are other sites around the Middle East that have been connected with the Templars, but the sites above have some of the greatest history and seem to be the most likely potential treasure sites.

Of course, the problems we have in differentiating between static and noise are hardly limited to the Middle East. It's a worldwide problem when we consider the Templars, as their scope was so vast, their power so impressive, while their secrets were just as numerous, and the number of concrete, trustworthy documents, so few.

Templar sites once stretched across Europe and the Middle East, and as the men scattered after Philip's order, they were spread even farther across the globe, both as underground Templars and as Freemason descendants, meaning the range of potential treasure locations is nearly limitless. This is both a blessing and a curse for those seeking answers to the many mysteries of Templar treasures.

Below is a short list of other countries where some scholars and Templar researchers believe it is possible Templars may have established themselves in some fashion, even after the fall of the Order:

1. Spain
2. Portugal
3. England
4. Ireland
5. Croatia
6. Elsewhere in Europe
7. United States

We'll examine each possibility in passing in the pages to come.

Spain

Old castle of the Knights Templar in Alcala de Xivert, Spain

In Spain, the following are locations that have been connected to the Templars:[84]

- Iglesia Veracruz (Segovia)[85]
- Castillo de los Templarios (Ponferrada)[86]
- Peniscola Castle[87]
- Castellote Castle[88]
- Miravet Castle[89]
- Gardeny Castle (Lerida)[90]
- Xivert Castle (Valencia)[91]

There are also other Spanish locations that have been connected to the Templars, but the above locations seem the most credible.

In particular, Spanish locations are interesting to Templar treasure seekers for two main reasons. First, the Templar history in Spain leading up to their official disbanding via papal bull in 1312 was slightly different than in other countries. King Alfonso I (once King of Aragon) was indebted to the Templars in more ways than many other European kings, and he was responsible for a great deal of Templar treasure and holdings even outside their involvement in the Crusades.

Second, the Templars were never prosecuted in Spain the way they were in other European countries. Instead, they were found not guilty, and under the protection of King James II, they were absorbed into the Order of Montessa, which was much less hostile than their absorption into the Hospitallers in other countries.

As a result, more than a few scholars, researchers, and treasure-seekers have suggested that Spain would have been a much safer place to consolidate and store hidden treasure than most other places in Europe at the time. The difficulty, of course, comes in determining where they might have chosen to hide their treasures.

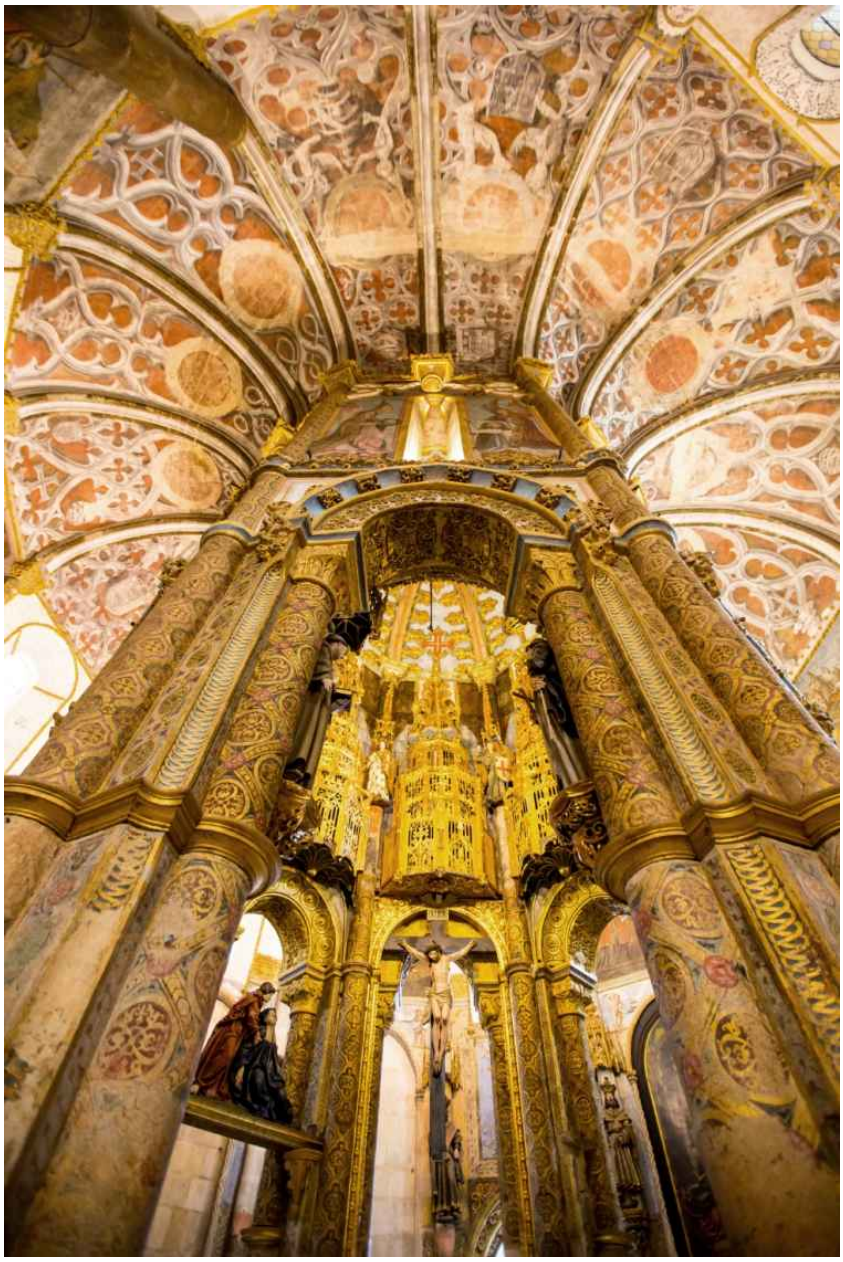
Holy locations in Toledo, for instance, are frequently considered, as Toledo had a long history as a stronghold of the Islamic empire before the Crusades, and the libraries there were among the best in the world at that time. An argument can certainly be made for the Templars making use of what had once been Islamic treasure storage sites to hide their treasure, which means that the castles of Montalban, Villalba, and San Servando are all considerations for some scholars, as is the Templar House in Toledo. That said, each of these sites has been searched thoroughly in the past, so if there was Templar treasure there, it has either since been moved or is tremendously well hidden.

The Castle of Peniscola is another frequently suggested site, because of how heavily fortified it was – implying that it was meant to protect something, and would have been a good site to keep valuables – and it is also a location that has known a wide range of secrets. It was an important site to the Carthaginians[92], for instance, and it also holds mystery, in that

there are several sea caverns of some importance. However, as Pope Benedict XIII later made it his home, it seems that if Templar treasure was ever there, it has either since been moved or is very well concealed.

And that's the problem with all of the best possible locations in Spain: while it seems quite likely that the Templars may have hidden treasures there, possibly even in several different locations, all the best candidates have since seen such heavy traffic that it seems impossible that anything could still be hidden there. This is a common problem with Templar sites, of course, and Portugal is not much better.

Portugal



The Convent of the Knights of Christ in Tomar, Portugal

In Portugal, the following are locations that have been connected to the Templars:

- Almourol Castle[93]
- Idanha Castle[94]
- Monsanto Castle[95]
- Pombal Castle[96]

- Soure Castle[97]
- Tomar Castle[98]

There are others, but these are the most commonly discussed.

Portugal has an interesting history with the Templars, in that even after they were officially disbanded by the pope, Templars held important positions in Portugal, especially in exploration and navigation. Of course, this also opens up the possibility that Portuguese Templar navigators and ocean-going expeditions could have taken treasure just about anywhere in the world Portuguese exploration went in the years ahead...but that's another rabbit hole we don't need to consider just yet.

Palace of the Knights Templar in Tomar, Portugal

Portugal, like Spain, offered Templars protection, though this was done in a slightly different way. In Portugal, the king at the time, King Dinis, offered Templars protection under an exemption from the Pope. Then, in 1317, ten years after the Templars were first persecuted in France, Dinis applied to

the Pope to reform the Templars in Portugal, under the new name the Order of Christ. Two years later, he was given Papal permission, and the Order of Christ was officially recognized by the Church. In other words, for twelve years the Templars in Portugal were kept safe, until they could be rebuilt under a different name, and this is further complicated by the way in which the newly introduced Order of Christ and the already existing Order of Aviz dovetailed into each other, often sharing Grandmasters.

One last little bit of history to provide context here: the Order of Christ and the Order of Aviz in turn became the two backbones of the Portuguese national flag when it was designed in 1910 – such is the impact each had in the country. Therefore, if any European nation state is still helping hide Templar secrets and treasures, Portugal has to be the likeliest candidate.

It is in that context that we must look at the locations listed above, as each has played a prominent role in Templar history – but also in the history of either the Order of Christ, the Order of Aviz, or both.

As for outside Portugal, a compelling argument can be made that in the decades and centuries after being officially disbanded, the Templars in Portugal pretty successfully morphed into the key positions of the Order of Aviz and Order of Christ, allowing them to control some of the most important parts of Portuguese exploration.[99] If we consider the following key discoveries and lands claimed for Portugal in the 15th century, for instance, it becomes immediately apparent how, if the Templars chose to move their treasures by Portuguese ships, the treasures could be nearly anywhere.

> **1415**: Ceuta conquered, brought under Portuguese reign
> **1418**: Madeira Island discovered, added to the Portuguese empire
> **1427**: Azores discovered, added to the Portuguese empire
> **1444**: Cape Verde discovered, added to the Portuguese empire
> **1488**: Bartolomeu Dias sails around the Cape of Hope – the southern tip of Africa – meaning the whole African continent has been opened to Portuguese explorations

1492: Columbus discovers the West Indies, opening up the New World to Portuguese (and European) exploration
1500: Pedro Alvares Cabral discovers Brazil, which is added to the Portuguese empire

In that context, searching for the Templar treasure can sometimes seem hopeless. Knowing that Portugal is one of the places in which the Templars were safest at the time they were officially disbanded, it seems quite likely that whatever treasure ended up there – and not in Scotland, or Nova Scotia, or elsewhere – may well have been in Portugal only until explorers and navigators in the Templar tradition found somewhere safer to stash their secrets, including in Africa, India, or even the Americas.[100]

The Templar treasure – if we're willing to accept that it may have been in Portugal in the early 14th century – could be anywhere by now.

England

Temple Church, Bristol, England

Of course, our perspective shifts when we consider England, as the Templars were, for the most part, pretty well sheltered in England as well. Given the large number of temples in England which are still connected to the Templars, the number of potential hiding locations sometimes seems a bit staggering. Names alone can tell a fair story in this country – nearly any site in England containing "Temple" in the name can be connected to the Templar tradition, so pervasive was their land and power once, and so staggering was their architecture.

In England, the following are locations that have been best connected to the rich Templar tradition, and as such, seem like the best candidates for treasure, or for clues to the Templar treasure:

1. Bristol: Temple Church[101]
2. Cambridgeshire: Denny Abbey[102]
3. Cornwall: St Michael's Mount[103]
4. Cumbria: Temple Sowerby[104]
5. Essex: Cressing Temple; Little Maplestead[105]
6. Herefordshire: Garway Church[106]
7. Hertfordshire: Church of St Mary the Virgin; Royston Cave; Temple Dinsey[107]
8. Kent: The Manor of Temple Ewell[108]
9. Leicestershire: Rothley Temple[109]
10. Lincolnshire: Temple Bruer[110]
11. London: Temple Church; Temple Mills[111]
12. North Yorkshire: Westerdale; Temple Cowley[112]
13. Oxfordshire: Temple Cowley; Templars Square[113]
14. Somerset: Camelay; Temple Cloud; Templecombe[114]
15. Staffordshire: Keele[115]
16. Wiltshire: Temple Farm[116]
17. Warwickshire: Temple Balsall[117]
18. West Sussex: Shipley Church[118]
19. West Yorkshire: Temple Newsam[119]

There are also other locations in England that have been connected to the Templars, but the above locations seem best-sourced, best-preserved, and seem clearly Templar built, rather than just Templar influenced. It is also by no means a complete list of all the Templar holdings in England, only those that seem like they could still be important today. A few are more promising than the rest.

Royston Cave, for instance, is promising because of its location at an ancient crossroads – connecting Icknield Way and Ermine Street, in Royston. Icknield Way is believed to be one of the oldest routes in England, and held special significance for some among the Templars as it could connect to both the pagan traditions in England and to the early English Christians.[120] At various points the Templars were also responsible for improving and protecting the route. Ermine Street was likewise important, dating back to Roman control of the English Isles, and the Templars were likewise responsible for it at different times.[121] Royston Cave was a central command post, and Templar knowledge of both routes has led some to suspect that there may be clues in the area that are yet undiscovered.

Likewise, Denny Abbey seems as though it may contain secrets, as it was once a preceptory for the Knights Templar, and the way in which it was handled as the Templars were disbanded has led some to believe it may yet hold clues. In particular, Edward II seized the abbey from the Templars in 1308 and gave it to the Hospitallers, but they chose to leave it vacant, which is how it sat until 1324, when the King retook possession. What happened there in the 16 years between, however, is not known. Did it just sit entirely vacant? Or might some Templars still have made use of the Abbey?

Similar stories – including gaps of time in the histories of these important buildings – can be told for many of the Templar holdings in the list above. What great clues have been lost as a result? Without doing a great deal of further digging into English history – and perhaps even then – it's truly difficult to say.

Ireland

The Clontarf Castle, Dublin today - By Phillip Perry, CC BY-SA 2.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=13586614

In Ireland, the following are locations that have been connected to the Templars:

- Dublin: Clontarf Castle; Baldungan Church[122]
- Sligo: Temple House[123]
- Wexford: Templetown[124]

As with the other countries we've looked at, there are other locations in Ireland that have also been connected to the Templars.

Treasure seekers have long speculated about the Temple House of Sligo, which has been destroyed several times over.[125] While a castle does indeed stand on the property now, it isn't the original Templar castle (which was

destroyed in the 17th century) but rather a rebuilt Gothic mansion, which has also seen damage on several occasions.[126] It is that damage to the grounds that is particularly concerning to treasure seekers, as they wonder what potential clues have been removed from the grounds as a result.

After all, the original castle was one of the first Templar holdings in Ireland, and was once a great Templar house. Given how many suspect a great number of Templar treasures were ferreted away to Scotland, isn't it possible that some of those secrets may have been hidden in the center of Templar power in Ireland?

Again, though, so much history has been lost that much of this is speculation, as it must be, with so little historical documentation to go on.

Croatia

Fortress of Klis, Croatia

In Croatia, the following are some of the locations that have been connected to the Templars[127]:

- Brckovljani
- Fortress of Klis
- Hrvatska Dubica
- Nasice
- Nova Ves
- Senj
- Vrana

Croatia is another place where the history of the Templars is not particularly well documented, but there are bits and pieces we can stitch together to get at least a few ideas about where the Templars operated there, and where in the country they might have been most likely to hide treasure.

For instance, there are numerous sources that point to the myth of a hidden Templar treasure in Vrana, but is it a myth? Unfortunately, when it comes to source materials, none of them seem to be in English – so if this is something you want to look into further, consider the potential need for translation beyond just Google Translator. In any case, the once great Templar fortress of Vrana now lies in ruins, so careful excavating would likely be necessary to find anything that may have been hidden there.

Templar fortresses in Ljuba and Sibenik have likewise been destroyed. While some scholars say this was because the Templars weren't very good rulers while in the area, others say it was to keep them from falling into Turkish hands, and others yet say it was to protect secrets contained in the fortress architecture.[128] Whatever the cause, it's likely secrets were lost with the destruction of the castles themselves.

Elsewhere in Europe?

The church of San Bevignate in Perugia. - By Perugia City
ttps://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=9914814

In other parts of Europe, the following are some locations that have been connected to the Templars:

- Church of San Bevignate, Italy[129]
- Templstejn, Czech Republic[130]
- Chwarszczany, Poland[131]

There are also numerous theories that suggest that the Templars may have had connections to Switzerland, which in many ways seems plausible, as France borders Switzerland and would have made an easy escape route. And the theories hold some weight, too, in the number of Swiss cantons that display Templar insignia in their official flags, the strong Swiss banking connections and tendency toward secrecy, and so forth. The only problem in assuming that the Templars may have fled to Switzerland with their treasure is that there aren't any particularly appealing good starting points for a search. That is, even if many of the Templars had fled there, there are no clear signs of Templar bases in Switzerland that we could use in developing further clues, so if the Templars did go there, and did hide treasure there, they did a good job of remaining under the historical radar.

United States

There are also plenty of Templar and Freemason scholars who believe that some of the treasure may be hidden in the United States, a theory which the movie *National Treasure* had a great deal of fun with. That said, none of the scholars have been able to narrow the search down much beyond theory, so if this is something you're interested in exploring, you'll need to do more digging.

As in the case of Switzerland, it's easy to make the case that the Templars may have – via their descendant Freemasons or via their Portuguese explorer descendants – moved their treasure to the New World, and even to the United States specifically, but it's much more difficult to make particularly strong cases for any set location, which is why it's far more common in fictional works (such as *National Treasure*) than in non-fiction.

In Pop Culture?

And, lastly, let's review how the treasures of the Knights Templar are depicted in pop culture. While we looked briefly at more modern works addressing the Knights Templar in fiction, movies, and games before, we haven't really looked at how those works look at the Templar treasure.

From the very beginning, legends have connected them to treasure, because of their first headquarters at Solomon's Temple on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, an area obviously rich in history and lore. Because of their original location, numerous legends begin with the idea of the Templars making a discovery that may have rocked the Church if made public – though what that discovery was, exactly, varied from story to story.[132]

Sometimes the story was related to something about Jesus' relationship with Mary Magdalene. Sometimes the story centered around Jesus' death, or a relic, or hidden church secrets. Regardless of what the story was, it frequently ended up being connected to priceless treasures, and the idea that

the Templars controlled such treasures is as much a part of their origin story as any other.

This, according to some interpretations of the history of the time, may have even been one of the reasons Philip was so eager to get out from under his debt to the Templars and put them out of commission – he, too, was looking for treasures.

As a result, stories of what happened to the treasure after the Templars were officially disbanded vary tremendously.[133] Of course, scholars, historians, and researchers might point to legends and various bits of evidence that could point to treasure having ended up in any of the locations mentioned earlier. One argument has even been made that part of the reason the Templars were labeled heretics may have been that they found the Copper Scroll of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and kept its list of treasure locations to themselves, away from the Church.[134]

As you can imagine from the wide array of sites previously noted, stories of what the Templars did with any treasure they may have had at the time of their officially disbanding vary greatly, which is why we suggest picking a location that may interest you, and then digging in further, as the number of resources now available for eager sleuths is truly mind-blowing. Partly the result of popular culture references in movies such as *The Da Vinci Code* and *National Treasure*, and partly the result of the ability of the internet to explode an idea, the amount of research available to those interested in the Knights Templar and their potential treasures is quite expansive – to the point where one interested in diving deep could easily spend the rest of their life investigating the Templars, their treasure, and the myths and legends that surround them.

Where Would You Search?

So, having looked at all the evidence of a lost Templar treasure, where would you begin your search? Would you return to the Holy Lands, where the Templars once were? Would you scour Northern Africa, in pursuit of

treasures that made their way there from the Middle East? Would you follow the eighteen lost boats – and if you did, would you follow them to Scotland, or to Nova Scotia? Would you search for clues across France, or elsewhere in Europe? Or would you follow the byzantine world of the Freemasons and the Illuminati across the sea to America?

The truth is, there are any number of places you could begin your own search, and nearly anywhere you might choose to begin would offer plenty of evidence in support of your investigation.

When it comes to the Knights Templar and their lost treasures, what we're most certain of is not the answers, but rather the many, many questions left by their rapid dissolution at the start of the 14th century. Even now, more than 700 years later, we have far more questions than answers.

Fortunately, that's part of the fun of researching and investigating the Templars. Because there is so little of which we can be 100% certain, there's far more room for speculation, for curiosity, for postulating ideas.

The Knights Templar are one of the last great mysteries available to us, and the search for their lost treasures is a chase unlike any other. Should you choose to take up the search, we hope this was a great starting guide.

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Volume 3

THE HIDDEN TRUTHS OF HISTORY'S MOST NOTORIOUS SECRET SOCIETY

THE FREEMASONS

THE MYSTERIOUS ROOTS OF FREEMASONRY

CONRAD BAUER

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Introduction

Who really rules the world? According to some, there is a shadowy sect of hidden men directing governments all around the world from behind the scenes. These invisible puppet masters are tied into conspiracy theories across the globe, taking in everything from the assassination of John F. Kennedy to the attack on New York and beyond on September the 11th, 2001. Typically, if you trace the origin of these conspiracies back far enough, you will come across one name. The Freemasons.

But who exactly are the Freemasons? Believe in the conspiracies and you might well assume that they are responsible for every major geopolitical decision and event that takes place throughout the world. But to others, they are simply a sort of gentlemen's club, a social group that does a lot of good service work in the community. In this book, we take a different approach.

Where did the Freemasons come from? Here, we will examine links between the Freemasons and another of history's most famous organizations, the Knights Templar. Could the Templars have laid the foundation of the Freemasons? Did they set up the secret society to extract revenge for their demise? Did they inspire an English rebellion simply to destroy their enemies? Looking over the course of many centuries, we will seek and reveal the evidence—should it exist—that demonstrates the links between these two organizations.

Simply because they are so very secretive, people are liable to project their beliefs onto the hidden group. But, in this book, we will try and focus only on the facts. Sometimes, these facts can be far more shocking than the theories or speculation. Read on and discover the secret truths of the ancient Freemasons.

In the Beginning

One of the biggest mysteries surrounding the Freemasons is their origin. For centuries now, people have argued back and forth about precisely when the order was founded and by whom. There have been several competing theories, many disproved notions, and some outright forgeries. The question of origin is huge. While today we might have a current incarnation of the Freemasons capable of operating entirely independently from the actions of a secret society formed many centuries ago; some people believe that it is the founding members of the order who provided the ideological foundation —and thus the direction and objectives—of the Freemasons. If we want to understand the Freemasons, we have to understand where they came from.

But that is not to say that we have to select a single theory and stick with it. On the contrary, the origin stories of the Freemasons can be incredibly helpful in our attempt to understand just why opinion about this order is so fractured and controversial. The differences between the versions of origin stories that people choose to believe will often reflect their inherent biases and opinions. For example, those who believe that the Freemasons are a continuation of the Knights Templar, might be more willing to believe that the order still guards ancient secrets. On the other hand, those who believe that the order was a gentleman's club formed in the Eighteenth Century, seem far less inclined toward the more controversial opinions of the Masonic Order. Thus, by learning about all of the different origin stories, we can begin to understand and get a grip on just why and how opinions about the Freemasons can differ so widely.

So, by learning the history of the Freemasons, we can gather a unique insight into how they function in the world today. That is to say, while not every account of the historic order of the Freemasons is true, the fact that these stories have formed part of public opinion of the order gives us some measure of insight. By understanding those stories which are not true—as well as those that are—we can form our own opinions and have a better, more cohesive understanding. As ever, the truth invariably lies in the

middle ground; and the story of the Freemasons is often a shadowy, clandestine narrative written in shades of grey. Without definitive heroes and villains, some people can struggle to understand the reality of the situation. Therefore, we must attempt to discover more about every single aspect of the Masonic history, rather than just the highlights.

That is why it helps to start at the very beginning, however, when even the age of the Order of the Freemasons is debated, telling the full and complete story can be difficult. In cases such as this, it can help to take a chronological approach. While the early history of the Masons often involves entirely different groups of people, including those who will never have heard of the name 'Freemasons,' learning about this background will give us a greater understanding when the key players start to move into place. Freemasonry did not emerge into the world fully formed. Instead, establishment of the order (whenever this happened to be) was the result of multiple forces and motions. World events conspired to lead to the founding of the Freemasons and so—if we want to truly understand where the order came from—we should try and understand this background in greater detail. This means we will need to travel back hundreds of years, to a world much changed from our modern society.

The story of Freemasonry is one of legends. For many years—centuries, even—the Freemasons simply existed. Though many people knew that they existed, there was little knowledge of where they had come from or what had prompted their formation. That changed toward the end of the Seventeenth Century, however. Masons at that time began to question their own origin and began to investigate where they had come from. Over the years, this historical inquiry began to include outsiders and those who were either not involved or were suspicious of Masonry. As such, a more complete, more rigorous, and historical profile of the group started to emerge. But the details are still hotly contested. For the oldest verifiable origins, we will have to go back to medieval times.

If you spend more than ten minutes researching the Masons on the internet, you will come across one name over and over again—the Knights Templar. As it happens, they are tightly wound into the story of the Masons.

However, this involvement is often disputed. What we do know, is that the Knights Templar are credited with involvement in the formation of the Freemasons. And whether it is true or not, since that theory is so widespread, we should spend time learning about the Knights Templar, so that we may better understand what it is about this group that makes people so willing to tie them to the Masons and their history. The story of the Knights Templar is complicated and disputed in its own right, but the history is fascinating, nevertheless.

The Knights Templar

There have been hundreds, if not thousands of books written on the subject of the Knights Templar. They captivate the imagination of the masses in a way that few other organizations have, except perhaps the Freemasons. Given that the two organizations are among the most famous and intriguing of their type, it seems only natural that they should be linked. Furthermore, the blending of the histories of the two organizations means that our story will begin much further back in time. To discover the verifiable roots of the Knights Templar, we must travel back to the turn of the previous millennium.

The story begins with the Crusades. A Holy War fought between the Catholic Church and the early iteration of Islam, the disagreement emerged over the nature of the territory itself. To put it briefly (and to do a disservice to the rich cultural heritage of the city), Jerusalem became a key geopolitical issue. With both major religions laying claim to the area as being sacred (as well as Judaism, another religion, doing the same), there were frequent disagreements over who would control the city. For hundreds of years, power had ebbed and flowed in the region. At the time when we join the story, in 1095, Jerusalem was under the control of the Muslim rulers.

Like many historical events, the situation was complicated. We won't have time with the scope of this book to go into the various political quarrels and disagreements. For example, the original precept for the invasion of the Holy Lands by the westerners was concerned with aiding the Byzantine Emperor in repelling an attack by Seljuk Turks. Gradually, as the Papacy and other key Western states became involved, that fight grew into a wider campaign to retake Jerusalem and the surrounding areas, which had been under Muslim control since the 7th Century. Added to this, various power struggles within the Western royal houses meant that certain rulers were keen to launch military campaigns, others wished to endear themselves to

the church, and there were those who were convinced to join for other political reasons or obligations.

Essentially, however, the Holy Lands—sometimes referred to as the Levant—became a target for a newly formed Christian army. These Crusaders, as they became known, made their way from Britain, France, Germany, and Italy (as well as other states) via the land. Along the way, there were various incidents, including one notable and savage attack on a Jewish community in the Rhineland. The violence along the route would set the tone for the eventual arrival in Jerusalem.

The First Crusade (there would be more to come) was handled like a true military campaign. As the Crusaders made their way from city to city, from places like Antioch and Nicaea, they lay siege to and captured key towns, cities, and castles. The process took years and many lives were lost, but eventually they made it to the city of Jerusalem.

Laying siege to the Holy City in 1099, the Crusaders found themselves in difficult terrain. Outside of the city, the countryside was an arid wasteland. There was little in the way of water or food and, so far away from home, they were struggling for sustenance. Running out of time, out of supplies, and out of manpower, they were unable to fully surround the city and prevent supplies from getting in. Though they had begun their campaign with tens of thousands of men, many of them on horseback, they were now down to 12,000, with only 1,500 of these being cavalrymen. These men were all that remained, taken from various countries and backgrounds. Making camp now, their morale was at an all-time low.

An initial attack on the walls was repulsed. Next, they attempted to march around the walls, chanting at the tops of their lungs after a three day fast. It was hoped that the walls would fall just like the biblical story of Jericho. It failed. After receiving news of a backup Muslim army setting off from Egypt to repel the Crusaders, one final assault on Jerusalem was required. On the 15th of July, a double pronged attack on the city caused the defenders to flee the walls. The crusaders were inside.

What followed was a massacre. The Crusaders had marched for years, covering thousands of miles and losing many friends along the way, all with the goal of retaking Jerusalem. The bloodbath has passed into legend for its barbarism and brutality. Most notable—at least, in terms of the story we are telling—were the activities on Temple Mount. Many defenders were said to have retreated to the spot, one of the most holy places in the world. Temple Mount was vital to the three major Abrahamic religions, home to the al-Aqsa Mosque, the Dome of the Rock and the Dome of the Chain. Legend has it that the biblical figure Solomon built his temple on this spot, a temple which was destroyed and rebuilt a number of times. For Muslims, it is the third most holy site in the world, the place from which Muhammad ascended to heaven. As the Crusaders attacked, it seemed a natural place to seek sanctuary.

The Crusaders pursued and cut down anyone they found. Eventually a pause was called by the leader, allowing those who were sheltering in the Al-Aqsa mosque to be saved. They would last a day, the Crusader commanders waiting until the streets of Jerusalem ran red with blood before entering the mosque and killing the sheltering foes. As the Crusaders took over the city and began to erect the nascent Kingdom of Jerusalem, the city was coming to terms with bloodshed on an unprecedented scale. Thousands were dead, many more injured. Half a world away from home, the Crusaders set about the business of ruling the Holy Land.

This was the world into which the Knights Templar was born. Following the violent conquering of Jerusalem, Christianity now had control of one of the religion's most holy sites. Pilgrimage to the spot became important, for people demonstrating their devotion to Jesus Christ. In a time when the only way to travel for example, from France to Jerusalem, was on foot for those who were poor), by horse for the rich, or by boat for those both rich and lucky. By any measure, such a journey was long and treacherous. Furthermore, the violence left behind in the wake of the Crusade hardly endeared Christians to the local communities they passed through in the Levant region. While Jerusalem might have been under the control of the Christians, the surrounding area was not quite so safe.

Plagued by bandits, thieves, and those bearing a grudge for the violence waged against the Muslim communities by the Crusader's, it was not uncommon for Christian pilgrims to be attacked and sometimes even killed during their trip. At the worst, highwaymen were killing travelling parties of hundreds of people. Over the course of the ensuing decades, this violence got worse and worse. Eventually, someone decided to do something, offering protection to the pilgrims making their journey. That man was Hugues de Payens, a French knight who, in 1119, petitioned the rulers of Jerusalem for the permission to creation a new society. De Payens's vision was of a religious, monastic order, a disciplined band of knights who would swear to provide protection to the pilgrims. By 1120, the request was granted, and the new band, known as the Knights Templar, was formed.

The name came from their base of operations. The new order was awarded a wing of the royal palace, the building situated atop Temple Mount, located within the captured mosque where the city defenders had hidden before being killed. To some, it seemed strange to award such a young group with such a privileged piece of real estate. It would be the first of many mysteries surrounding the Knights Templar.

At first, the organization filled one of the most important needs for the new Christian government in the Holy Land. Along with other Monastic orders, the Templars became a kind of makeshift standing army. Despite coming from different backgrounds and nationalities, the rulers of Jerusalem were finally able to project an organized professional military power. It was no surprise that their number grew rapidly, their importance recognized almost immediately.

But along with the growth in numbers, the Templars experienced a growth in wealth and political power. At the beginning, the order had been composed of nine knights, with scant finances and a dependence on donations from powerful Christian rulers. Indeed, the full title of their organization was 'Poor Knights of Christ and the Temple of Solomon.' To further press this image of poverty upon the world, they had taken as their symbol two knights riding a single horse, an iconographic representation of the Templar's poverty. But this poverty was not long-lasting.

The Knights Templar had friends in powerful places. Thanks to these friends, they quickly moved ahead in the pecking order of monastic knights in the Holy Land. High ranking members of the church took it upon themselves to sing their praises, a move which eventually led to an official, formal endorsement from the Vatican. As such, the Knights Templar became far more than a simple, localized military order. They gained a reputation and a favored status across the Christian world. Soon, people were encouraged to assist the Templars. From across Europe, people began to donate land, money, business, and even family members to the Knights Templar. More than one powerful aristocratic family dispatched a young male member to the Holy Lands with the intent that he would join the Templars. As the group's wealth swelled, they received a further boon when a papal decree known as Omne Datum Optimum made them exempt from the local laws of the nations. The Templars—and the Templars alone, it seemed—could pass across any border, would not be subject to any local taxes, and were not beholden to any authority, other than the pope and God. Within the space of two decades, the knights from atop Temple Mount had become one of the most powerful and wealthiest groups in the world.

Over the course of the years to follow, the Templars became more and more essential to the balance of power in the Near East. Fighting against the legendary Saladin, they used military expertise and training to wage a continued campaign for control of the Holy Land. But while the military victories might have been essential to those in the immediate vicinity of Jerusalem, it was the burgeoning wealth of the order which would be more keenly felt in Europe. Following the papal endorsements, the coffers of the Knights Templar were overflowing. One of the biggest revenue streams came when aristocrats and nobles placed their assets into the care of the Templars. When a nobleman decided that he would 'do his duty' and take part in the Crusades, he could sign over his lands and businesses to the Templars, who would run it in his absence. They would take a cut for doing so, and the nobleman would be assured that his assets would receive care and attention in his absence, and be returned to him when he left the Holy Land. With a variety of revenue streams, the Templars were able to

establish one of the most important institutions in the medieval age. The bank of the Knights Templar.

In the decades following the Templars' growth, the vast majority of new recruits were assigned not to military roles, but to administrative positions. The reason was simple. There was a huge trend for many people to travel through the Holy Lands. Often, these were rich aristocrats who did not want to carry their wealth with them because the countryside was often laden with bandits. Now, they could travel with a minimal amount of money, relying on the Templars to aid them. The Templars had branches in every major city. A deposit of money made in one of these would equip a person with a signed letter, detailing the nature of the wealth that had been provided. Once the person reached Jerusalem, they could visit another branch of the Templars office and make a withdrawal. It was, in many ways, the precursor to the modern banking system, the arrival of what has often been considered the first real international conglomerate.

In hardly any time at all, the Knights Templar had grown from a band of nine poor knights to one of the most powerful groups in the world. They had wealth in many forms. They took the donations they received and the money they made and bought land across Europe and the Middle East. They built farms and vineyards, establishing businesses that made them even more money. They built castles, cathedrals, and fortifications all over Europe, as far outside their original territories as possible, with Templar forts being found as far west as Portugal. They imported, exported, manufactured, farmed, banked, and owned their own fleet of ships that crisscrossed the Mediterranean. At one point, they even owned the entire island of Cyprus.

As the Knights Templar grew ever more powerful, other countries began to sit up and take notice. The original Templars had been a dedicated group of knights, sworn to protect the poor pilgrims moving across the Holy Land. By the end of the 12th Century, however, they had become one of the most powerful organizations on the planet. They were not beholden to local laws, even in countries such as France, Britain, and Germany. Answering only to

the pope, those countries which held a grudge against the Vatican began to view the Templars with suspicion.

It is not uncommon for many of the theories regarding the Freemasons' power to relate to the international banking community. People have labelled the existence of the big banks as an international cabal and as being responsible for a number of (seemingly unconnected) global events. In this respect, it's easy to draw parallels between these conceptions of the Freemasons, and the banking traditions of the Knights Templar. While many people use the (often tenuous) relationship between the Freemasons and the global banking community as an accusatory measure, it echoes medieval suspicions of the Templars.

In the history books, it's not uncommon for people to label the Knights Templar of the late 12th Century as arrogant. It's easy to see why they might have been. In less than a century, they had risen from purposefully humble origins to become a major international player. The original military commanders of the organization had long passed away, some in battle, some of natural causes. The man who had taken charge, Grand Master de Ridfort, was not loved by heads of state and powerful nobles. They viewed him and his organization as arrogant.

Added to this, the balance of power in the Holy Land was beginning to tip. While the Crusaders had captured Jerusalem decades earlier, their grip the surrounding area was beginning to loosen. Saladin was a prodigal commander, succeeding in wresting control of many essential sites across the Levant. The Templars, once an essential projection of Christian military power, were tainted by association with the new failings. As Saladin's army enjoyed success, people began to resent the Templars for their failure to maintain control of the Holy Land. When Saladin re-conquered Jerusalem in 1187, it became an easy stick with which to beat the Templars. That the remaining land held by Christians in the area—a thin strip of territory along the coast—was owned by the Templars, seemed to be a further issue, people accusing the Templars of protecting their own interests, rather than those of Christianity.

Over the course of the next hundred years, power really shifted in the region. By 1296, the Holy Land was considered completely lost. Muslim rulers in Egypt had swept in from the south and helped to completely drive Christian influence from the area. The Templars reacted by shifting their base of operations away from the Levant, instead operating out of their holdings on Cyprus. Across Europe, rumblings of another Crusade emerged and the Templars began to focus on their business empire instead.

But their enemies did not forget. One of the most important of the Templars' foes was the king of France, Philip IV. Philip had a variety of reasons for hating the order. Not only did he resent their influence and their immunity to local laws, but he was himself hugely in debt to the Templars. Wanting to continue his expensive wars against Edward I of England (rather than fighting a Crusade), he envied the wealth of the Knights Templar and wished to make it his own. Elsewhere in Europe, he was fighting against the Holy Roman Empire (in modern day Germany) and had a somewhat corrosive relationship with the Vatican. Philip was in a difficult place and the wealth of the Templars seemed to be an obvious target.

Philip's fortunes changed after two key events. First, the King of England died. His replacement was Edward II, a weaker and less formidable foe. Furthermore, a change in pope saw the previous Holy See replaced by someone more prone to treat Philip with kindness, the Frenchman Pope Clement V.

Early rumors suggested that the new pope meant a new Crusade. It was not uncommon for potential pope's to voice their ambitions to retake Jerusalem and, when Pope Clement V ascended the Throne of Peter, the Knights Templar wondered whether a new crusade might mean a chance to return to the Holy Lands and retake their positions of wealth and influence, both of which had been waning since leaving the Levant. Keen to listen to the ideas of the new pope, the Templars dispatched their grandmaster to France, where Clement was staying.

The Grandmaster of the Templars, Jacques de Molay, was an aging man. He arrived in France armed with a collection of plans and schemes that the

Templars had developed in order to retake Jerusalem. He was received with apparent good intentions, humored and welcomed. But it was not to last. Together, Philp and Clement had been plotting the downfall of the Knights Templar. On the 13th of October, 1307, the authorities launched an assault on the Templars, placing every member in France under arrest. According to legend, this fateful day was Friday the 13th, the original reasoning as to why such a date might be considered unlucky.

The arrests were not just significant in and of themselves. The Templars who were arrested were subjected to torture and punishment. In the French cells, the authorities extracted confessions and admissions. Apparently, the Templars had become an unholy institution, beset by the worship of false idols, unchristian practices, and considerable amounts of sin. These dubiously obtained confessions were held aloft as proof of the Templars' guilt and were used as a precept for dismantling the international organization of the Knights Templar.

The campaign against the Templars in France was vicious and quick. But it was not global. Even though the pope had issued a papal decree to outlaw the Knights Templar, other rules were not so quick to act. In England, for example, the new King Edward II refrained from acting. Instead of arresting all the Templars he could find, he wrote to the Vatican to petition for the order's innocence. When the pope responded with an official decree reiterating the decision, Edward had no choice but to act and, in January of 1308, he too issued an arrest order for the Templars in England. In the three months between the two actions, however, the local members of the order had plenty of time to make themselves scarce. With them went much of their treasure, not only the jewels and precious metals, but their detailed records as well.

As such, the institution of the Knights Templar was deemed illegal overnight. As the French King moved through the Templar estates and holdings, seizing their wealth for himself, the group's international conglomerate was forcibly dismantled. With members now officially labelled as devil worshipping heathens, it was no longer profitable to visibly be a member of the organization. Those Templars that were not

caught, tortured, and killed were forced to go into hiding. Thanks to the political maneuvering, the group was forced to become a secret society.

But now that the Knights Templar had been driven underground, where could they go? One of the few places they had left available was Scotland. Scotland, like a number of other countries around Europe, was in a perilous political position. At odds with England, they were somewhat excluded from the international community. Pressure from the English crown distanced the Scottish monarchy from the rest of Europe and the authority of the pope. While the rest of Europe was busy hounding down the Templars, the Scottish did not even issue an order for their arrest. Taking care to conceal themselves in these tumultuous times, it is believed that many members of the Knights Templar took what they could of their incredible wealth and travelled north to Scotland.

For some people, this is where the theories about the Knights Templar really begin to splinter. It is at this point that there is a real divergence between the provable histories of the organization and those possibilities which veer much further off the beaten trail. Though we don't have enough space here to go into the true depth of the stranger side of the Templars, the sheer variety of the possibilities should provide the foundation of understanding that will help with our knowledge of the Freemasons.

A great deal of the attention paid to this particular moment in time has focused on the very nature of the Templars' wealth. While certain people are content to understand this wealth in purely financial terms, others have suggested that there was something far more interesting being hidden by the Templars. How, they suggest, did such a small band of poor knights rise to power so quickly? How did they gain such legislative immunity from the church? The answer to this, it is suggested, goes all the way back to Temple Mount. It has been suggested that the Templars first home in Jerusalem was far more than just an administrative branch. When awarded the offices in the buildings on the holy spot, the Templars began digging. While excavating the site, they found… something. The exact nature of what they may have found remains just as contested as the idea of whether or not they found anything at all. This find has been proposed as everything from a

statue of Baphomet imbued with dark magical powers, to the Ark of the Covenant (in which was stored the original tablets bearing the Ten Commandments), or even the Holy Grail. Even the nature of the latter is contended, from being a simple cup used at the Last Supper, to being the extensive documentation of the mortal lineage of Jesus Christ, the family he had on earth and the descendants through to the modern day. Any one of these items has been held aloft as being the key to the Templars power and the reason why they might had been able to ascend to such an important position so quickly.

Trying to figure out not only what happened to the Knights Templar, but what secrets they guarded, has taken up the life of many a historian. But how exactly does it relate to the Freemasons? In order to understand that, we will have to take what we have learned about the Knights Templar and look ahead a few years to the state of England in the 14th Century.

The Peasants' Revolt

After Edward II came Edward III. The formers reign was considered something of a disaster. Continued disagreements between many high ranking barons and other noblemen plagued his time as king. In particular, his relationship with a man named Piers Gaveston caused uproar throughout the kingdom. It is unknown exactly what about this relationship caused controversy, but it was enough to cause legislative chaos and a constant struggle for power. Eventually, Gaveston was caught and executed by the barons. This caused an extended period of conflict, with the barons basing themselves in Scotland. Edward II fought against them, trying to quell problems in his own kingdom and a long-standing dispute with Scotland itself. To further complicate matters, Gaveston had also managed to provoke France's ire, meaning that his relationship with the King had caused issues on two important fronts. Eventually, the barons' fight with Edward led to the English King being defeated in battle by a Scot named Robert the Bruce in 1314. The defeat left a lasting impact, the aftershocks being felt in the form of famine and strife in much of England. Criticism of the King abounded.

Edward II seemed unable to satiate his critics. After a protracted disagreement—involving betrayals, legislation, and executions—with the Scottish, he was forced into signing a peace treaty with Robert the Bruce. A similarly embarrassing problem was emerging in his dealings with France when—in 1325 —Edward had dispatched his wife Isabella to France to negotiate a peace. It was thought Isabella would be the perfect candidate. After all, she was a daughter of the French King, a woman whom Edward had married specifically to make peace. When she was sent to France, however, she refused to return, and also refused to negotiate a peace with her homeland. Instead, she sought out an ally and mounted an invasion of her adopted homeland. In 1326, with an army at her back, Isabella and her alliance succeeded in waging war on Edward II. The King, fearing for his life, caught between belligerents to the south and to the north, fled to the west. He took refuge in Wales but was captured a few months later. He was

forced to give up his crown, resulting in his unpopular reign coming to an end in January 1327, passing the crown on to Edward III, his fourteen year old son. Barely a year later, the former king died under mysterious circumstances, likely murdered on the instruction of the new rulers.

Despite his young age, Edward III's reign was much more successful. Though he took the crown in 1327, he ruled until 1377. For fifty years, Edward III fought to assert England as a key player in European politics. Though the former ruler had marginalized the country's influence, the new king increased the power of England's military. He fought long and hard against France, beginning the so-called Hundred Years War and seeing great victories for his country. At home, however, not everything was quite as successful. The emergence of the Black Death, a plague which swept through the country, left many thousands dead, and entire towns and villages suddenly decimated. In his later years, his health would similarly suffer. By the later 14th Century, his ability to govern was hampered by ill health and, in 1377, he died from a stroke. The crown was passed to Richard II, the king's ten year old grandson, whose own father had died the year before.

So why are we going through all of this in a book about the Freemasons? The turmoil of England in the 14th Century serves to distract the eye from the strangeness of the disappearance of the Knights Templar. By the time Richard II took the throne, it seemed that the Templars were long forgotten. With a new young king on the throne, with England now a major political power, and with France and Scotland seemingly quelled to the point of no longer being an existential threat, it seemed England might be set up to enjoy a prolonged period of success. But it was not to be.

In a pre-Reformation age, the Catholic Church was one of the world's only true international organizations and held some degree of power in almost every community across Europe. This was true of England and the Church was not innocent of the corruption and greed which prompted the peasants' anger. This inherent conflict–between being a force for good and being prone to corruption–reflected a similar contradiction which would have been held by the exiled Knights Templar. The Templars had originally been a Catholic militant organization, a projection of the church's own military power. But then they had been condemned and convicted by the very organization they had sworn to protect. In the opinion of some scholars, it was this decree from the Vatican that broke the bonds of allegiance between the church and the Templars. Following their exile, the Templars found themselves without a master. They were free to take whichever side they wanted.

But the Church itself was divided. In 1377, the temporary home of the pope in Avignon was abandoned. Pope Gregory XI returned the home of the Church to Rome, to the consternation of many of his cardinals. Since moving to France and drawing closer to the same French monarchy which had outlawed the Knights Templar, the Catholic Church had taken on a French flavor. The move back to Italy was unpopular among the French contingent. When Gregory died and a new pope was elected, riots in the streets of Rome influenced the decision to place an Italian on the highest seat in Christendom. Even though Pope Urban VI promised to keep the base of the church in the Vatican, the French priests disagreed. What followed was–at that point–the greatest schism in the church's history. Known as the

Great Schism, the church split into two separate camps in 1378. Alongside the Vatican's Pope Urban VI in Rome, the French Cardinals elected their own Pope, Clement VII, to rule from Avignon. Along with the support of the various cardinals, countries began to take sides. With Clement VII went France, Scotland, Portugal, Spain, and various German principalities. With Urban VI went England, Poland, Hungary, most of Holy Roman Empire, and those who would be considered enemies of France, perhaps the most powerful country in Europe at the time. Each camp ex-communicated the priests of the other and proclaimed itself the one true church.

So France and England were fighting a conventional war. They were simultaneously taking opposite sides on a spiritual conflict. They needed funds and needed them quickly. In England, this meant the poll tax of 1377.

In 1381, the introduction of a poll tax caused uproar. The peasantry was furious. The common people had been at odds with the powerful land owners for years, their position changed by the ravages of the Black Death. The power of the barons had increased under previous kings, but the destructive nature of the Black Death had drastically reduced the work force. As many as a third of the population had died. The resulting famines took even more. As such, the peasants found their skills in greater demand and their negotiating position greatly improved. While the peasants sought to take advantage of this morbid situation, the increases in their wages came at the expense of those who owned the land. Since these landowners were now in possession of a greater amount of power, they conspired to pass laws which would limit the amount they paid to peasants. Wages were driven back down to the levels they had been before the plague. Furthermore, details of peasants' lineages were taken and an effort made to bind people permanently to a particular lord. Serfdom was being further made into law. Tensions began to boil over.

Inherent grievances came to a head in the late spring of 1381 when rebellion broke out in Kent and Essex. It would eventually come to be known as the Peasants Revolt. Led by Wat Tyler and others, the peasants began to gather in massive groups. They demonstrated, going so far as to burn down Savoy Palace and kill members of the King's court. They

wanted the abolition of serfdom, the feudal means of governance which saw the poor workers beholden to the whims of whatever person happened to own the land on which they lived. The King and his court would retreat to the Tower of London and quickly realize that they did not have the strength to fight thousands of peasants. They would have to negotiate.

The King's position was weak. Not only was he just fourteen years old and dependent on the advice of his inner circle, but his kingdom was not as financially secure as he might have hoped. The wars of his grandfather, while succeeding in establishing England as a military power, had been costly. Funds had been drained. To make matters worse, the emergence of such a young king seemed to have encouraged corruption among the court. In response, the crown had decreed a number of new and insidious taxes, levelled again against the peasants. It was one of these–the poll tax–which had been one of the catalysts of the rebellion. Just as much as the barons and landowners, the king and his lack of funds were at fault. Desperate for money, facing strife on every side, England had erupted into rebellion. To complicate matters, it seemed as though there had been some degree of planning behind it.

It's often been suggested that the Peasants' Revolt was far from spontaneous. The various whisperings of rebellion and revolt were encouraged throughout the country, as the different strands of consternation facing the authorities began to come together at once. Men like John Ball, the leader of a band of priests who sided with the poor and the helpless, fanned the flames of revolt throughout the country. As the different communities across the country were told to rise up, as many as 100,000 peasants gathered to show their dissatisfaction with the crown.

Some of the first signs of such revolt came when tax gatherers were beaten up as they went about their duties. When a local lord attempted to forcibly collect his taxes and attempted to have a crowd of a hundred defying peasants arrested, the officers were attacked and the lord was lucky to escape away to London. When the government responded by sending an even bigger force to quell the issue, the gathering masses attacked with a renewed vigor. Prosecutors were not only captured, but beheaded. First

taking place in Essex, similar events happened in Kent and the areas surrounding London. The mob began to swell in numbers, with people coming from villages and towns across the country to march against the king.

Among this mob of thousands, one man seemed to emerge as the leader. Without much provocation, many quickly began to turn to a man named Walter (or Wat) Tyler for instruction. The revolt even took his name, with many people knowing the movement as Wat Tyler's Revolt. But very little is known of the man, of where he came from or what his specific grievance had been. Why had so many thousands of men suddenly accepted him as their leader? It is difficult to say, though some have taken this to be a signal of a greater level of background understanding than is perhaps clear in this day and age.

As Wat Tyler and his men moved through Canterbury, beheading "traitors" along their way, similar civic upheaval in Essex followed. On the same day that Tyler and his men were attending a huge mass in Canterbury Cathedral, the men of Essex were burning down an important building belonging to the Knights Hospitallers. The building was significant. It had originally belonged to the Knights Templar, given to them in 1138 by a royal decree. During the time when the Templars were outlawed and chased from Christendom, it had fallen into the possession of the Hospitallers. Indeed, the Hospitallers were one of the chief beneficiaries of the move to prosecute the Templars, taking on many of their holdings and assets, and assuming a large portion of their wealth. Over the coming days, many of the Hospitallers most important buildings and dwellings would be attacked by the rebels, seemingly as part of a wider social upheaval, though proportionally far more than any other group. Could it be a coincidence that the guiding hand of the rebels was so keen to attack the sworn enemy of the Knights Templar? It is here that we start to see the linking of the threads, the narratives moving that had been in place since the Crusades centuries before.

On the 11th of June, both bands of rebels decided to turn and march on the capital. By this time, their combined numbers totaled more than 100,000.

Despite being far apart and a seemingly untrained bunch, historians were impressed by the resolve and discipline demonstrated by the rioters. It was a seventy mile journey and it took just two days, with both groups arriving generally at the same time. It is easy to see why so many people have suggested that this movement was pre-planned, rather than the product of random happenstance.

It was at this point that the teenage king retreated into the Tower of London. He took with him his most trusted advisors, those men who he could rely upon to assist him in making judgements. Among their number were the Archbishop of Canterbury and the king's treasurer, who happened to be a member of the Hospitallers. In addition, there was a man named Henry Bolingbroke, who would eventually become famous as the future King of England. With them were earls, barons, and other assorted members of the aristocracy, all of whom had something to fear from the suddenly malignant peasants.

By the 12th of June, the rebels were massing in what is now East London. They marched across the river, moving through Southwark. From across London, more and more people began to join them. As rebellious groups formed in different parts of the city, they took it upon themselves to sack and burn palaces, with particular attention paid to the records kept by the aristocracy, records of lineage and genealogy which were used to bind peasants to serfdom. The prisons were attacked and all inside turned loose.

From inside the Tower of London, the young king could see the smoke rising up from his city. In response, he sent out messengers to the rebels, asking what they wanted. The response he received informed him that the rebels sought, in fact, to save the king. They wanted to free him from the band of traitors who had surrounded him and dedicated themselves to destroying the country. The king asked for a meeting, pleading with the rebels to halt their sacking of the city so as he might be able to hear their complaints in full.

The rebels agreed. They moved to the river, the men from Kent stationed on the south side and the men from Essex on the north side. The king set off

from the Tower of London on his royal barge, slowing drifting down the river to meet with the rebels. It was halfway through his journey that his advisors were finally able to persuade him to stop. As it became apparent that the king had halted, the rebels sent out their demands directly to the barge. Firstly, there was a list of men who must be executed. Many of the men on the list were on the royal barge at that very moment, including the prior of the Hospitallers and the Archbishop of Canterbury. As might be expected, the king's council advised against such a move. From the shore, the rebels could see the king's barge turn around and head back towards the Tower.

The rebels entered the city proper. By some mysterious stroke of fortune, neither gate they moved to happened to be guarded. Unhindered, they walked straight through. Refraining from sacking and destroying everything in their path, they instead marched straight to Fleet Street, an important part of London which happened to contain a prison. They attacked, freeing all the men inside.

Nearby were two forges, places which had once belonged to the Knights Templar. They were now being run by the Hospitallers. Just as before, the rebels turned their ire on the forges and destroyed both of them. As they then marched through the city to the Savoy Palace, the mob only stopped to attack any building which they were able to certify as belonging to the Hospitallers. They destroyed many buildings, but few suffered the wrath of the mob quite so much as the Savoy Palace. Art works, furniture, tapestries, and many other valuable items were destroyed beyond repair. After they were finished, the rebels set fire to the palace, aiding the process by ensuring a number of gunpowder kegs were first moved inside.

Once Savoy Palace was destroyed, the band of rebels again seemed to turn their attentions to buildings which might be owned and operated by the Knights Hospitaller. Any such property between the Thames and Fleet Street was vandalized and then burned. Records were set afire and any lawyers who might try to stop the crowd were killed. The one Hospitaller property which seemed to escape much of the destruction was a small church. However, the rebels still went inside and fetched any records they could find. These were burned in the street. It was perhaps no coincidence that this church had also previously been the property of the Knights Templar. It was one of the only targeted buildings not completely destroyed. When compared to the Hospitaller headquarters in Clerkenwell, a building which was damaged beyond all repair, it seems something of a miracle that the Templars' former church should escape so lightly.

The rebels continued their campaign. They moved across the city, freeing prisoners and burning records, paying special attention to Hospitaller properties. One group, after trying to petition the Tower of London for an

audience with the king, found themselves denied. In response, they lay siege to the Tower. That it was perhaps the most defensible building anywhere in England did not seem to concern them.

Throughout the city, it was announced that being a member of the Exchequer or the Chancery (two of the country's tax collecting authorities) was enough to condemn a man to death. When seeking evidence of such a crime, the presence of ink on a man's fingers was proof enough of his guilt. Seeing as the vast majority of literate men had received their education from the church, it was no coincidence that a large portion of the dead were members of the clergy.

The king seemed to be shocked. So far, he had no response to the uprising. Lacking an army to combat such a massive rebel gathering, the money to pay off the crowds, or the preparation time required to deal with such a well-ordered rebellion, the king was at a loss as to how to respond. Rather than a show of force or strength, he would have to rely on tricking his enemies. On the 14th of June, it was announced that the king would agree to meet with the rebel leaders, with a view to giving in to all of their demands. The message was given to town criers across the city and proclaimed for all to hear.

As a meeting place, the king and his advisors selected Mile End, a place with open fields which just happened to be outside the walls of the city. The aim was to draw the rebels out of the city first and foremost. This was mostly achieved, with a large number of the forces following the king out beyond the city walls. But not everyone went. Wat Tyler and a few hundred men hung around in the city, armed with a plan of their own.

Even on the morning of the planned meeting, all was not right in the king's camp. Before they had set off to meet the rebels, the Archbishop of Canterbury had been caught attempting to take a boat and escape down to the Thames. People along the banks recognized him and the resulting outcry and abuse from the river banks forced the oarsmen to turn around and retreat to the Tower.

The king set off for the meeting, taking along his trusted advisors. While the records make sure to list the people who accompanied him, they are silent on those members of the court who did not. In particular, Sir Simon Sudbury and Sir Robert Hales are not mentioned. That is to say, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the prior of the Knights Hospitaller. Whether they chose to stay in the Tower or were ordered to do so is not clear. Neither is there any mention of who took on the role of leader in the rebel camp that day, while the most notorious leaders—men such as Wat Tyler and John Ball–remained in the city with some secret agenda.

At first, it seemed as though the meeting in Mile End would go well. There were two demands from the rebels. First, that they should be permitted to hunt down and kill anyone they deemed to be a traitor to the king and the people. The second request was that the system of serfdom be abandoned, with every Englishman being a 'free man.' The king's response seemed reasonable. To the first request, he agreed that 'traitors' should be executed, but only provided they were judged to be guilty in a court of law. To the second request, he turned to a crowd of thirty clerks who had come with him, especially designed to draft legislature in quick measure.

But while the meeting between the rebels and the king seemed to be going well, events inside the city played out regardless. The rebel leaders struck. Wat Tyler and his men had planned to attack and hold the Tower of London itself. An ambitious goal in the best of times, let alone with only a few hundred scantily armed rebels. Already the most fortified building in the country, the Tower was being guarded by hundreds of professional soldiers. There was a drawbridge, a portcullis, and a heavy gate, not to mention the sheer range of weapons possessed by those inside. Furthermore, the troops in the Tower had Robert Hales, prior of the Knights Hospitaller and a proven battle commander, to instruct them.

Nevertheless, Tyler and his men attacked. As it happened, it seemed as though the rebels had a man on the inside. When the rebels arrived, they discovered that the drawbridge was already down. The portcullis had been lifted. The gate was open. The rebels strode into the Tower of London and the historians struggle to note so much as an angry word as they did so.

Now having gained entry to the Tower, the rebels moved to capture their foes. The Archbishop of Canterbury was their first target and they found him in the chapel. Dragging him out into the open air, they beat him and threw him to the floor. At the same time, another group arrived with the similarly disarmed Hospitaller. The two men were held in place while the rebels searched the tower for other men on their list; tax collectors, lords, and the like. Once the rebels had everyone they wanted, they dragged the men to Tower Hill. In front of a baying public, they sliced off the head of each of the men. The severed heads were taken and placed on poles over London Bridge for all to see. In deference to the former Archbishop of Canterbury's station, they took his distinctive mitre and nailed it to his head.

After the executions, the rebels spread out across the city. They searched for others on their list, the men who had caused them strife. In all, they found around 160 victims, all of whom they killed. Among the dead were the corrupt and the traitorous (as deemed by the rebels), as well as anyone who spoke out against them or praised the recently deceased.

Furthermore, a special dispatch was organized by Tyler. He gathered together a small group of rebels and sent them out of London, towards Highbury, with the aim of destroying a very specific building. It also belonged to the Hospitallers, having recently been renovated by the order and being deemed as one of the most ostentatious and lavish houses around.

It didn't take long for word of this attack to reach the king and the men in Mile End. The meeting was abandoned and the king fled back to his home in Castle Baynard, clearly not wanting to return to the Tower of London. All the while, the collection of clerks who had been tasked with writing up legislature carried on about their task. Before the king departed, many of the rebels had snatched up pages from the clerks, riding back to their hometowns to brandish this new royal decree.

What happened next is hazy and ill-recorded in the history books. It seems that the king agreed to meet the rebels once again, this time at Smithfield.

The meeting was arranged for the next day, the 15th of June. Before the meeting, the king attended mass at Westminster Abbey. He had been followed to the service by a number of the rebels, curious to see what was happening. When they were there, they spotted a particularly loathsome tax collector hiding in one of the chapels. Despite the man's pleas for mercy, he was dragged out into the open air and beheaded in front of a crowd. The king finished hearing mass and departed for Smithfield.

Many rebels were already waiting for him. They had lined up along one side, while the king and his men lined up along the other. Exactly what happened next is hotly disputed in the history books. It is said that Wat Tyler was among the rebel leaders and that his fierce insults levied against the king caused much consternation, or that his behavior was deemed to be insulting to the crown in some fashion. In all likelihood, this probably just gave the king and his men the excuse they needed, allowing them to follow through with what had been the plan all the long. It happened as follows.

Standing on opposite sides of the field, the king requested the presence of the leader of the rebels. This meant Wat Tyler. To issue this request, he sent the Mayor of London himself, William Walworth, across the field. Tyler, realizing that such an audience with the king would place him far from his men and heavily outnumbered, grew suspicious. He came up with a hand signal which, if implemented, meant that the rebels should immediately attack. His orders were that, during such an attack, every member of the opposing forces should be killed, all apart from the king. Joined by just one man bearing his banner, Wat Tyler set out across the field.

It is telling that we only have government accounts of what happened next. The majority of these people, it seems, were not there. In their version of events—the only version we have–it seems as though Wat Tyler met with the king. There, he issued his list of demands once again. This time, the demands had increased. Now, Tyler wanted the church's property to be seized and the wealth distributed among the poor, he wanted numerous legal changes, and he demanded that there only be one bishop for all of England.

As Tyler worked through his list of demands in front of the king, William Walworth silently drew his dagger. Sneaking up behind the rebel leader, the mayor cut him along the neck. One of the king's squires jumped to help, taking out a sword and stabbing Tyler two times. As the rebel tried to turn back towards his men, he fell from his horse. The wound was mortal. He would not live.

From across the field, it was not clear what had happened. The hand signal agreed before Tyler had departed had not been seen. Instead, they saw a rider set out from across the broad expanse and come towards them. It was the king, the fourteen year old boy himself. He spoke out to the rebels, telling them that he was happy to meet their demands and that they should accompany him to Clerkenwell–the place where the Hospitaller palace still burned–to seal the pact. With that, he rode off, taking his men and his army, too.

The rebels were left confused. They didn't know what to do. A few set out across the field themselves and recovered Tyler's body. He was dying, clearly, so was taken to a nearby hospital to see what could be done. After more than an hour of trying to come up with a plan, the previously well-organized rebels decided that they would follow the king's instruction. They set off for Clerkenwell.

Unbeknownst to them, anti-rebellion forces were beginning to mass. Perhaps inspired by the news of Wat Tyler's death, hundreds were gathering. The Mayor, the king, and many other authority figures sent out the call for any able bodied man to take up arms against the rebellion.

When they arrived in Clerkenwell, the rebels immediately demanded that the king hand over everyone who had been a part of Wat Tyler's murder. As the rebels protested their case to the king, the anti-rebellion mob gathered around. Slowly, without the rebels realizing who they were, these men encircled the rebels. Eventually, the leader was able to inform the king that he had the upper hand. Noting that the rebels were now heavily outnumbered and surrounded, the king demanded that they disperse, lest they be punished for their actions.

Acknowledging that the tables had turned, the rebel crowd began to break up. This time, there was little organization. They moved away in dribs and drabs, the only truly organized group seemingly led by John Ball, the preacher, who took a band of rebels back across London Bridge. Whereas they had passed over victoriously just three days before, now they were fleeing the city.

Mayor William Walworth went looking for the rebel leader, Wat Tyler. He found Tyler in the hospital near Smithfield, his wounds being attended to by the nurses. Even though the injuries were likely mortal, Walworth was not going to take the chance. He dragged Tyler from the hospital bed and out into the street. There, like so many of the rebels' victims, Tyler had his head struck off. It was used to replace the heads of the king's men on the poles above London Bridge.

Many of the king's inner circle received knighthoods. They had helped to repel the mob from the city. But they had not entirely dealt with the problem. Outside of London, many thousands of people were still angry. The rage at the taxes and treatment of the poor was not just confined to Essex and Kent. Indeed, in the weeks before and after the Peasants' Revolt, there were incidents all across the country.

Reports from Suffolk showed that a local preacher had gathered together disgruntled locals to burn down the home of a corrupt nobleman, and chased out clergymen from a monastery that held people in the grips of serfdom. Records were burnt, wealth was plundered. The chancellor of Cambridge University was similarly executed for corruption. A group of rebels managed to take control of Nottingham Castle, marching through the open gates in an echo of what had happened in the Tower of London. Other castles were taken in this fashion, other aristocratic houses were sacked, and other people were executed. It happened up and down England. Added to this, many of the targets happened to belong to the Hospitallers.

It is clear that there was some communication and organization between the rebels. As far north as Yorkshire, almost to the same day, peasant uprisings

took place. The fallout from the rebellion was huge. Across the country, the king and the authorities clamped down on even the tiniest signs of disorder and discontent. The pieces of paper that had been taken by some of the rebels from the meeting with the king were disavowed. Promises were broken, arrests were made, and people were executed. Inquisitions were held. Not only to try to root out the rebels, but to uncover the wider web of communication hidden behind the revolt. There was clearly a suspicion that there was much more to the uprising than a simple and sudden rush of blood to the collective heads of the peasantry. Someone, people suspected, was behind all of this.

In a book about the Freemasons, you may be wondering why we have started the discussion with examples from the medieval age which have seemingly nothing to do with the Masons and their modern iterations. But the stories about secret societies go back much further than you might imagine. In looking closely at the Knights Templar and the Peasants' Revolt, we can see the shadowy operations of a clandestine organization. In order to thoroughly understand why modern masonry is such a controversial subject, we should understand its ties to these age-old events. As we will see in the next chapter, things might be more intertwined than you may have ever imagined.

The Shadow Organization

The aftermath of the Peasants' Revolt was brutal. Though most of the records and discussions of the time stem from those who had a particular interest in appealing to the king's favor, there are ways in which we can look deeper at the potential truth hidden behind the propaganda and bias. For example, the paperwork associated with the questioning and investigations by various aldermen and other state figures often turns up the mention of a strange organization. While many of the rebels admitted that they were legitimately outraged at the authorities, others happened to refer to a mysterious group which dispatched representatives and messengers, stirring up discord and helping to inspire the rebellion. This group was referred to in the records as the Great Society.

A book about the Freemasons would be remiss not to mention the Great Society. Though we have covered a lot of ground already in this history, the benefit will soon arrive. The idea is to draw a line between the earliest iterations of the Knights Templar, through to the Great Society which helped organize the Peasants' revolt, through to the emergence into wider society of the Freemasons, and then their ultimate acceptance as a part of the fabric of modern civilization. While some might suggest that this hints at a wider conspiracy theory, that one organization has been dominating the political machinations of Western society for many centuries, this is not true. Instead, the presence and importance of secret societies (of which the Freemasons are the most famous in the modern world) should be examined with great scrutiny. In order to do this, understanding why the modern Freemasons might be connected to their medieval forebears is essential. In order to continue this quest for knowledge, we should ask ourselves: who were the Great Society?

When we look back at the official account of the Peasants' Revolt, there are a few points which stand out. First, the role of the king. Though still a teenager at the time, Richard II is painted as a leader and a decisive figure. He makes decisions, inspires men, and eventually crushes the rebellion. But

this flies in the face of reality. In truth, it was not until the age of twenty three that Richard truly ruled his kingdom. Before then, it was governed mostly by an elected council of regents, an inner circle of men who acted and made decisions on the king's behalf. Unofficial descriptions of Richard that have passed down tell us of a rather weak-willed, stammering teenager. Definitely not the sort of boy to have ridden up to a rebel army and spoken confidently to them after cutting down their leader.

Second, the role of the Tower of London is somewhat suspect. It was the easiest place in England to defend, especially against a small band of rebels. Why was it so easy for Wat Tyler to simply stroll in with a small group of men? Why did he not bother holding it himself as a headquarters after making his executions? Why bother taking it at all if the meeting with the king held any chance of resolving the rebels' issues? It seems more as though the point of the meeting with the king at Mile End was to remove the king from the city, rather than the rebels. This then opened up the Tower for the attack from Tyler, the rebel leader who didn't even bother to attend the meeting with the king. Could it be that the attack on the Tower was the true objective?

A third point, and in a similar vein; why were key members of the king's council left behind in the Tower for the rebels to execute? The Archbishop of Canterbury being left behind is perhaps understandable, seeing as he had tried to flee the Tower using a boat that very morning. But Robert Hales being left in the Tower is much more difficult to explain. As the prior of the Knights Hospitallers, Hales was not only an experienced battle commander and one of the best fighters in the kingdom, but he was the man who should naturally have been chosen to accompany the king while he met with a great threat to the kingdom. Hales had fought in the latest Crusade with great success. He was head of a military order of monastic knights. He was known throughout the kingdom as a fearsome man and a fine soldier. Why leave such a man behind?

There are just so many questions. Why did the king not return to the tower following the meeting with the rebels? Was it a coincidence that his household servants and staff happened to be in place already? We come

back again to the idea that it was the king's council of regents, rather than the king himself who made these decisions. They likely arranged such matters beforehand and simply led Richard around.

It also helps to look at the king's role in the aftermath of the rebellion. For many, royal pardons were issued. Towns which had played host to the rebels were issued an amnesty, allowing them to return to their business and for the matter to be forgotten. But it did not apply to everyone. There were 287 men specifically named as being excluded from the amnesty. Apart from those on the list who already happened to be in prison following the crackdown on the rebels, the other men simply vanished. They do not appear again in the record books. Men such as Henry de Newark and Richard de Melton were named on the list of the 287, as well as being mentioned in a royal writ that was issued on the 10th of December, 1381, wanted for the role they had played in riots in Beverly. The response from the local government was that the men were simply not to be found anywhere in the area. They had vanished.

As such, the natural follow up question is to ask where they went. In a time when movement between towns and cities was much more difficult and much less practiced, the disappearance of people outside a local sphere of influence was a much bigger deal. The fact that these men were just a few examples, that it was the same story for many of the men on the list of the 287, seems strange in and of itself. Some historians have drawn a parallel between the vanishing of these rioters and the vanishing of the Knights Templar seventy years beforehand. The two groups are similar: recently condemned by the authorities, wanted by the government and the church both, and suddenly in desperate need of shelter, food, and somewhere to hide. For so many men to suddenly find refuge with such skill seems indicative of a pre-planned escape mechanism, perhaps the existence of safe houses and bolt holes ready for those men who would inevitably draw the government's ire. This support, it has been suggested, was provided by the so-called Great Society.

At the same time, the reaction of the church was telling. Despite the fact that the rebels cut off the head of the Archbishop of Canterbury, his

replacement was not concerned with direct retribution. Instead, the church launched a campaign against heresy, the very same crime which the authorities accused the Templars of committing seven decades earlier. But the true impact of the rebellion on the church would not be felt for a while yet. It was the seeds of doubt and resentment which emerged during the Revolt that would later flower in full during the Protestant Reformation.

But, as mentioned before, the biggest mystery of the Peasants' Revolt is undoubtedly the shadow organization that seemed to be at work arranging things and colluding behind the scenes. That there was some level of secret organization happening behind the rebellion seems to be a fact agreed upon by most historians, though they differ on the exact details and scope of the mystery group. Furthermore, one of the main questions is whether such an organization was acting in direct response to the political situation of 1381, or was in fact a pre-existing body that had begun to act in response to grudges and agendas held for many hundreds of years? To put it simply, was the organization a one off response or an already established group? Could the 287 men absent from the amnesty have been suspected members of the group? Could this mysterious shadow organization have actually been the lingering remains of the Knights Templar, who had been in hiding for seventy years?

All indications point to the fact that such a large scale organized response to the government must have taken a great deal of planning. Thanks to recovered documents from sheriffs and bailiffs, we know that the authorities believed that meetings had been held in secret in the months leading up to June. This would have required a great deal of effort. Establishing a network of trustworthy people, vetting members, and deciding upon agendas and meeting places is tough, even when limited to a single geographic spot. Trying to do the same across all of medieval England would be incredibly difficult.

As it stands, the organization behind the Peasants' Revolt needed to be disciplined, clever, motivated, and prepared. Such a secret society, one which knew how to erect and maintain a means of clandestine communication across the country without being caught, seems to have

been out of the reach of the average peasant. Even working in groups of two or three towns, the means and resources available to the average working man would likely have been far from enough to accomplish such a task. Add in the fact that the majority of the peasants were illiterate and the true scope of such an organization begins to become apparent.

It should also be mentioned that, as hard as any such organization would be working to keep itself secret, there would be those who were working to uncover them. Spies, traitors, and double agents were not out of the question. In response, secret signals are used. These could be gestures, pre-arranged conversation cues, or mannerisms. The important part is that, in a society working across England, when messengers and agents do not know one another, such a system much be standardized. Again, this shows a level of resources and skill above the typical rebellion.

However, in a time when it is easy to read many sprawling conspiracy theories and often overreaching ideas of what a secret society might be capable of achieving, it should be noted that the Peasants' Revolt was not entirely orchestrated by the Great Society. There were a great many social and political motivations for the uprising. The most obvious of these is the Black Death and its aftereffects. The effect the Plague had on the labor market was one of the driving forces of the rebellion and it would be intellectually dishonest to suggest something like the idea that an organization purposefully introduced an epidemic into the country to create the conditions for a revolt. Nor could they have been responsible for the corruption and attitude of the church, nor the taxes and laws created by the king's government.

Instead, the organizing hand behind the Peasants' Revolt seems to have seen these conditions and opportunistically seized upon them when stoking the fires of rebellion. Taking old issues and grievances among the people, they articulated and voiced such problems for all to hear. They focused blame and anger, directing it toward their own goals. The fact that Wat Tyler was killed before the Revolt could truly fulfil its goals likely means that we will never know what this mysterious leader and his organization

truly wanted. We do know that the guiding hand of the rebellion seemed to die with him, with the organizers shrinking back into the shadows.

So where does this leave us? Though we suspect that the existence of the so-called Great Society was certainly true, we have close to seven centuries separating us from the reality. Furthermore, the quest to uncover evidence is difficult. Not only have just a fraction of the documents from the time even survived into the present day, but those that did are often written from the perspective of the authorities. As we have seen, the secret society in question was adept at hiding itself from the government. Those of us who are searching seven hundred years later are already at a huge disadvantage. Rather than proof of the Great Society itself, we see the imprint of the organization. We see the foot print, rather than the foot itself. We can interpret their existence based on the circumstances, the environment, and the government's response, rather than any one piece of brilliant evidence. There is no smoking gun. There is not even a reference to a single Great Society, the sources refuse to use 'the' as the definitive article, instead mentioning 'a' Great Society. We only use the label of the Great Society due to the fact that we have no better name.

Furthermore, trying to prove the existence of a secret society seems to be a contradiction in terms. To be truly secret and truly successful, a secret society would not be known to anyone else but members. That is perhaps why there is no official record of any kind of secret society anywhere in medieval England, other than the Lollards (whose work is only tangentially related to this matter).

And now, at least—and somewhat briefly—we come to the Ancient Order of the Free and Accepted Masons. From the outset, we should state that there is no contemporary documentation that confirms the operation of the Freemasons in England during the rebellion. Equally, no evidence exists to the contrary, though the burden of proof remains on the former position. Instead, the evidence linking the Freemasons with the uprising comes from a few years later.

After 1717, there was a shift in the way the Masons operated. As we will go into detail later on, they moved out of the shadows and became a public organization. It is after this time that the Freemasons exist as a verifiable group. But that has not prevented people who have been writing about the Freemasons to trace the lineage back even further. A cursory internet search or a glimpse through a number of the less-thoroughly researched books on the matter will list men such as Pythagoras, Julius Caesar, and other historical figures as being members of the order, or perhaps even Grandmasters. These are often flights of fancy, with little to link the speculation to reality. Such matters are hardly worth mentioning, beyond acknowledging their speculative existence. Other, slightly more tempered suggestions, have put forward men such as King Solomon (the man who built on Temple Mount) and that his temple was the first edifice dedicated to Masonry. More modern historians have labelled this an equal flight of fancy. However, that is not to say that the lineage of the Freemasons cannot be traced back to many centuries before the time when they first emerged into public view.

For many historians, the roots of the organization now known as the Freemasons can be traced to the medieval times. During this period, it has been suggested that stone masons and other professionals banded together in guilds (a verifiable fact) and that these guilds then transformed into secret societies. This is one of the most commonly accepted versions of the origin of the Freemasons. One only need look at the name to see the clear etymological link between a guild of masons and the Freemasons. So how does this relate to the Peasants' Revolt and the Great Society that may have organized it all?

Historians have pointed first to the alleged leader of the rebels, Walter the Tyler (to give him his full name.) As was the case in many professions handed down from father to son in England at the time, the surname of a man (typically using the additional 'the') would be an indication of his profession. In an age when a profession might stay in a family for years and communities would be relatively small, such names were important. Though their modern versions have been divorced from such professional qualities, one need only look at the surname of Wat Tyler to note that he

was likely a tradesman, or had at least come from a family of trades-orientated tylers (tilers).

Wat Tyler is a fascinating figure in English history. Seemingly from nowhere, he emerges to lead one of the country's largest ever rebellions, leading 100,000 peasants in a march against the aristocracy. He destroys many properties (including many belonging to the Hospitallers), burns many records, and executes many people (including both the Archbishop of Canterbury and the prior of the Knights Hospitallers). Just as quickly as he appears on the scene, he departs. A few days after becoming one of the most important people in the entire kingdom, he is executed and his head stuck on a pole over London Bridge. In all, his time in the spotlight lasted about eight days. Before then, we know nothing of the man. After, he becomes a legend.

As such, there have been suggestions that Wat Tyler might have been using a false name. Though his name might suggest a history as a roof tiler, his clear military acumen and leadership qualities seem to render this redundant. Instead, it could be that he chose the name 'Tyler' on purpose, wishing to indicate his position and his importance to those who knew the relevance of the name.

At this point, we will make a detour into Masonic law. For those who are unfamiliar, a Masonic Lodge as an organization is a well-defined structure. Within each lodge there are specific titles relating to specific roles and jobs. The name Tyler is one such title. Within the context of a Masonic Lodge, the man who has the title of Tyler is considered the sentry and the enforcer, the sergeant-at-arms of his respective Lodge. It is his responsibility to screen potential members, to check their credentials, to ensure that the meeting place is secure, and then—while the meeting takes place—to stand guard outside the room while holding a drawn sword. In modern parlance, it is essentially a ceremonial position. In the secret societies of old, at a time when they existed outside of (and often in opposition to) the law, it was an essential post. The name Tyler, to Masons, means something incredibly specific.

Therefore, if were are to entertain the idea that there might be a link (any at all) between the Great Society and the group who would eventually become the Freemasons, we can understand that the name Wat the Tyler was far more than a random pseudonym. To those in the know, the emergence of Wat Tyler at the head of the rebellion would have been a secret sign, a signal that this was an ordained military leader, the man who would hold the sword and deliver discipline and military success. The connection is tenuous, certainly speculative, but it is interesting nonetheless.

On a similar level is the idea that Yorkshire was an important center of the uprising, especially in the city of York itself. The city has long played an important role in Masonry, with Masons as recently as the 18th Century being certain of the idea that the York Lodge is the oldest in the country. The founding of the Lodge, they say, dates back to the construction of York Cathedral in medieval times. Over the course of the 18th Century, the York Lodge would play a key role in Freemasonry. Annoyed at the decision of London Lodges to go public with their existence in 1717, they spent the next decade distancing themselves from their southern brothers and asserting their right to stand alone, an importance and a privilege they suggest has been incumbent to the York Lodge since "time immemorial." Added to this, the special position of York with regards to Freemasonry is demonstrated by the modern belief—especially among American Masons—that the York branch of Masonry is the most authentic, most in tune with Masonic traditions.

There's no denying that the rebellion was certainly ideologically similar to many Masonic principles. Looking at the Revolt on a macro level, the rejection of serfdom, the determination to be free, and to throw of the shackles of domineering power relationships is very much in line with many ideas held aloft by the Masons. Indeed, one of the central concepts of the order—known as the Landmarks of Freemasonry—requires that a Mason be a "free man born of a free mother." Serfdom, seemingly, would prohibit this. Indeed, the fact that—by the close of the 15th Century—almost every man (at least, every white English male) in England could be considered "free" has been used by some to indicate that the very existence of such a requirement points to the idea that Masonry as a concept is very

old. That the Peasants' Revolt was perhaps a demonstration in favor of Masonic ideals, however, is not proof that any Great Society could be considered a forebear or an early iteration of the Freemasons. It does, however, help add color to the argument that the Masons may have existed (and held influence) long before the time that is most commonly accepted.

Perhaps the strongest evidence tying our various strands together is best demonstrated by looking at another society altogether. The key to understanding the potential earliest glimpses of a Masonic secret society could well be demonstrated through the existence of the Knights Hospitallers. The numerous attacks of the rebels on Hospitaller properties and the execution of their prior (or leader), Sir Robert Hales, is very telling. Take, for example, George de Donesby. Despite being from Lincolnshire, he was eventually arrested some 200 miles from his home and did indeed confess to being a member of the so-called Great Society. The coincidence here is that the striking peasants back in his home town were particularly distraught at the behavior of their local lords and had stopped paying taxes, taxes which would have eventually ended up in a manor controlled by the Hospitallers. He is one of the few men who can be directly tied to the existence of the Great Society and also possessed clear structural resentment of the Knights Hospitallers.

Of course, the string of attacks by the rioters on Hospitaller properties demonstrates that this was clearly an agenda driven process. For example, taking the rioters especially north of London into Highbury in order to burn down the Hospitallers' newly rebuilt manor is a clear indication that they were to be considered a natural enemy of the rioters. In the middle of London, surrounded by a litany of potential targets, the rebels went six miles out of their way to attack Hospitaller property. Similar examples can be found across the country, where rioters made special dispensation to target such properties. In Cambridge, for example, men rode ten miles from their path to burn another Hospitaller manor.

It has long been held that the Peasants' Revolt was partly a demonstration against the corrupt nature of the church. In so far as this is true, the rebels certainly targeted churches and religious buildings in their attacks,

particularly when they were burning records which might be used by the government in propagating serfdom. But the churches that they did attack were disproportionally owned and operated by the Hospitallers. It was only the properties that were owned by these Knights that the rebels purposefully sought out and burned down. Other attacks were often sporadic crimes of opportunity. Very rarely did the rebels deviate from their set path other than to attack Hospitaller properties.

Indeed, the one church which the rebels did not seem to want to burn down was the Hospitaller church just off Fleet Street. Instead, they took all of the available records out from the building and burned them in the street. Was it a coincidence that this same property had previously been one of the Knights Templars' favored properties? Might there have been a wish to preserve this church over all others, despite the presence of the Hospitallers? The church had been consecrated in 1185 by Heraclius, the then-patriarch of the holy city of Jerusalem in the name of the Knights Templar. The same patriarch similarly consecrated the Hospitallers' property in Clerkenwell, but—perhaps as that property had not previously been owned by the Templars—the rebels had no issue with burning it down. Could it have been a coincidence that the attacks by the rebels were so clearly aimed towards one of the oldest enemies of the Knights Templar? Could this have been an act of vengeance from a group which had seemingly been driven underground and out of existence?

Even small touches, such as the choice of uniform among many of the rebels, points towards a Templar influence. In places such as Scarborough, Beverly, and York, the rebels attired themselves in a white shawl, hooded and with a red decorative touch. Not only does such an item indicate planning—it would have been hard to make 500 of these on the spot and distribute them over long distances—but it was remarkably similar to the choice of clothing worn by the Templars themselves, a white mantle with a red cross.

One of the most interesting links comes from the death of Jack Strawe. Strawe was one of the highest ranking members of the rebel army, something of a right hand man to Wat Tyler. He was caught and taken to

London, whereupon he was sentenced to death for his crimes of helping to organize a rebellion. The authorities still tried to extract a confession from the man, however, and in exchange offered Strawe the chance of a Christian burial and the promise that three years' of masses would be said in his name. All he had to do was to confess the "true purpose" of the rebellion. Strawe agreed and gave the authorities a statement. In this statement, he confirmed that the plan was not only to assemble a massive crowd of common people and to execute any lords who opposed them, but to destroy the Hospitallers. Not just their property, but their organization. This hatred was left unexplained, but there seems to be only one logical answer to those who ask this question—just who could have hated the Hospitallers to such a degree?

It was a hatred that had been brewing for decades. Ever since the official disbanding of the Knights Templar in 1312, following the five years of torture and investigation by numerous institutions, there had been the question of what should be done with the Templars' extensive business portfolio. Many of those interested in breaking up the Templars wanted the wealth for themselves—and they took it —but one of the chief beneficiaries was the Knights Hospitaller. It's easy to see why a group who had been hounded and chased into secrecy might resent and loathe one of their chief rivals. Would this have been the motivation behind the destruction of Hospitaller property and the execution of the grand prior of the order, Robert Hales? Could the Templars have had a similar grudge against the Catholic Church—the same organization which had founded and then abandoned them—to the point where they ignored the Holy Sacrament, ignored ancient rites of sanctuary, and even executed the Archbishop of Canterbury? It's obvious that the Templars might have resented both institutions and that the Revolt provided them with the opportunity to extract some kind of revenge.

Indeed, there seems even to be a direct reference to the Templars in the chronicles taken from Bury St. Edmunds. One of the most bloody sites of the Revolt, it was specifically excluded from the amnesty. When digging into the records from the time, Antonia Gransden's book highlights the ire that might have been raised by the Templars. The chronicles repurpose

some of the Templars' most heroic and notable tales, with the Benedictine authors turning the Knights into treasonous men rather than tragic heroes. The accounts even go so far as to accuse the Templars of poisoning the King of Cyprus and his family. It would be enough to prompt a hidden Templar force into anger and hints at the propaganda campaign that was issued following the Templars' demise. As the source of some of the more extreme lies about the Templars, Bury St. Edmunds might well have had the violence brought upon the town through the actions of the Benedictine monks.

All of this supposition brings us to one important question. Though the Peasants' Revolt is commonly regarded as a failure, is this actually true? If indeed there was a Great Society—which might have been the descendants of the Knights Templar—providing guidance, expertise, and motivation, was the Revolt actually a success for those behind the scenes?

If we take the point of view of the so-called Great Society and assume that they bore some connection to the Templars, then was the destruction of Hospitaller, Crown, and Church property actually one of the major goals of the rebellion? If so, then there was more than a modicum of success to be enjoyed. Destroying vast amounts of valuable properties, destroying records, and removing wealth from the noted enemies of the Templars would certainly indicate that the Revolt could have been a success from the Templar point of view.

But this is difficult to believe. If we are to entertain the idea that the Templars were themselves the Great Society—or at least, that they formed its foundational layer—then we must wonder how an order than had been either destroyed or driven underground for sixty-nine years could possibly have been so influential. As well as having many of their most important commanders executed during the purge against the Templars, those knights who were members of the order would have aged drastically. Those aged twenty, for example, would be approaching ninety years by the time of the Revolt. They would have had to have been lower ranking members, at the very least. It seems implausible that members such as these would be able to live long enough to inspire a rebellion (especially if we discount more

wild propositions, such as the Templars' ownership of the Holy Grail and any attendant life-extending properties such an item might possess).

Likewise, the idea that the Templars could perpetuate themselves in secret over a number of future generations, still maintaining that initial lust for revenge, seems just as unlikely. Could such a society remain secret in England for close to seventy years, positioning itself to take advantage of certain societal changes and alterations that would eventually lead to the Peasants' Revolt?

Stepping back from the intricacies of the story for a moment, we can look at the facts:

- There was likely a group (loosely structured) of people who sympathized with the Templars in England around the time of their disbandment. This is seen in the larger numbers of members who managed to evade capture in England compared to other countries. When the crown and the church later worked together to find remaining Templars, they found only three members.
- Of the Templars who were captured in England during the first wave of arrests, many managed to escape from prison. This means that they had help, either on the inside or the outside.
- The first wave of arrests in England happened three months after the order was originally given on the continent. This would provide the Templars in England time to make preparations and prepare their legacy and hiding places.

- During those three months, the Templars could well have erected a new organization, a loosely structured group designed to help them following the order from the Pope.
- If such a group did exist, it would be founded with the considerable resources the Templars had at their disposal, which would be needed to carry on their fight long after the demise of the original members. Thus, it would be well-funded and would surely morph over the coming generations.
- If such an organization were to live for a long time, then the use of simple goals and objectives would allow them to remain focused, despite loose organization and the threat of detection.

But where could such an organization exist? Is it possible that we can draw a line between the fall of the Templars, the rebellion of the Great Society, and then the emergence of the Freemasons? We have already began to look at just how all three could feasibly share the same motivations and—as we will eventually see—how they share much of the same ideology. In the future, the Freemasons would even incorporate many of the Templars' words and phrases into their very existence. But in order to try and get to the bottom of this mystery, we will need to look north of the border. The key to all three organizations, it seems, is to be found in Scotland.

Scottish Roots

Scotland seems to be the common denominator when discussing the Freemasons and the Knights Templar. It is in Scotland that marks both the fall of the Templars and the rise of the Masons, though the exact nature of the transition is the hazy, difficult part. Depending on who you believe, such a transition could have taken place over a matter of years, of decades, or of centuries. In this next chapter, we will try to figure out how exactly the foundation might have been laid by the Templars to form the organization which might eventually become the Freemasons, as well as how this relates to the Great Society and the Peasants' Revolt. In order to achieve this, we should take a moment or two to consider the political situation in Scotland.

The relationship between Scotland and England is fractious, to say the least. Historically, the two countries have loathed one another for centuries. In a large part, this was due to the actions of a man we have already encountered in this book, Edward I. Nicknamed the Hammer of the Scots, Edward dedicated much of his life to dealing with problems to his north. We have already discussed Edward's role in restoring England's status and do not have time to go into great depth on the fascinating story of his wars with Scotland. However, a brief overview is necessary to set the scene.

Simply put, Scotland wanted to be independent from English rule. For clear reasons, England did not want this to happen. Relationships between the Lords of Scotland and the English crown allowed for a kind of accord, which suited both ruling parties. But the Scottish people were not pleased. From the ranks, a man rose up and fought against the English. His name was William Wallace. Immortalized in modern film, most people have heard of Wallace and his demands of freedom. He was one of the most successful Scottish battle commanders when it came to leading the fight against the English. By the end of 1297, Wallace had led small Scottish armies against much larger English forces and had won.

But Edward I was a formidable foe. He and Wallace locked horns and fought against one another over the coming years. These battles were fought against a greater geopolitical struggle, as Scotland tried to win over the allegiance of France and the Vatican, hoping that such an alliance might secure their independence. England fought back on the diplomatic stage, too, as Edward sealed their own accord with France in 1303. Edward, who made great use of the military force of the Templar Knights, finally won over when he convinced Wallace's fellow Scots to betray him. Abandoned by many Scottish Lords, William Wallace was caught and then executed in horrific fashion. Edward I seemed to have won and earned himself the nickname which would eventually emblazon his tomb. He had finally hammered the Scots.

It was the monarchs to follow that would have the most importance, however. As strong a leader as Edward I had been, those who followed possessed none of his fortitude. By the time Edward II was crowned king of England, he had inherited a delicate situation. To the north, Scotland was ignited with hate against the English. To make matters worse, the emergence of Robert the Bruce meant he now faced a Scottish king of his own. Robert had murdered his rival for the crown and was beginning a renewed campaign for Scottish independence. Though he had initially suffered defeat while Edward I was alive, he had retreated and planned his revenge. The brutality of Edward I against the Scottish would leave his successor with a furious nation led by a daunting opponent.

To the south, the death of Edward I had many implications. While Edward I was well-regarded by Prince Philip of France, Edward II was nowhere near as impressive a figure. Indeed, it was Edward I's admiration and use of the Templars which meant that Philip was unable to make a move against the organization. With the death of Edward I, the Templars no longer enjoyed such protection. Philip, noting the power vacuum that had emerged, was now able to make his move. In tandem with the Vatican, he launched the campaign against the Knights Templar.

So this leaves us with two institutions with shared resentments. Scotland and the Knights Templar had both been betrayed by France and the Vatican.

With the departure of Edward I, the Templars no longer enjoyed a position of privilege within England. Hounded by Philip's forces and the church, they were forced to flee, to retreat from the public eye and to find a place of sanctuary. With their wealth and their knowledge, it seems as though they would have been welcomed across the border in Scotland. The two bodies shared similar enemies, which practically made them allies.

Following the orders issued by the Vatican for the outlawing of the Knights Templar, countries across Europe reacted differently. While Templars in Paris, for example, were captured, tortured, and executed, this was not the fate of every single member. True, the leaders of the Templars had been tempted to go to France before the order was issued and this meant that the top level leadership (including the grand master) was killed, with as many as 56 Templars being burned alive on just one day in Paris. In France, certainly, the strike against the Templars was vicious.

But in Spain and Portugal, for example, there was a greater threat. Muslim armies had been invading the Iberian Peninsula from the south, with the Templars' military branch being a key part of the fight against the invaders. Accordingly, the local branches of the church conducted their own inquisition into the Templars. While the French and Italian clergy had extracted confessions under torture— during which the Templars allegedly admitted to everything, from urinating on the cross to blaspheming against God—their Iberian counterparts found the Templars to be innocent. But that did not mean they could be allowed to exist. Instead, the local Templars were rebranded and emerged as an apparently new order, the Knights of Christ. A key difference in this new outfit was that they were responsible to the local king, rather than the pope. The new Knights of Christ were permitted to continue their fight against the Muslim invaders.

In Germany, it happened differently. Hugo of Gumbach, the local leader of the Templars, decided to don his battle armor and marched defiantly into the council being held by the Archbishop of Metz. There, he issued a proclamation assuring everyone that the Templars were entirely innocent and that their grand master was falsely accused. In fact, he stated, it was Pope Clement V who was the evil party. Hugo declared that he was no

longer in thrall to the Holy See because of this. Along with all of the other Knights Templar present, he was innocent. So convinced was he of his innocence, both he and the other armored knights would gladly enter into trial by combat with anyone who believed otherwise. Such accusations abated rather quickly.

On Cyprus, the pope's instructions carried even less weight. As the location of the Templar headquarters, it took months for the ruling Prince of Cyprus to even acknowledge the papal bull and when the Templars were eventually tried, they were found to be innocent. The trial so incensed the pope that he immediately dispatched his own team of inquisitors to the island to perform a retrial. Unfortunately, however, no documents tell us of the outcome of such a trial. By this time, however, the Templars would have had more than ample time to prepare for the Vatican's men.

Even in France, things were not panning out exactly as Philip had hoped. One of the main motivations for his taking down of the Templars—to take their vast wealth for himself—was proving to be difficult to satisfy. The treasure that he might have expected to find seemed to be gone. The Templar fleet, one of the largest in Europe, had similarly gone missing from La Rochelle. The eighteen ships that were owned and operated by the Templars seemed to have simply vanished from existence.

What wealth did remain would be transferred officially into the ownership of the Hospitallers. Eventually, Pope Clement V would decree that the wealth and property of the Templars would transferred to the rival order, excepting those on the Iberian Peninsula, due to the threat from the Muslim forces. It would be an order that angered Prince Philip, the French monarch hoping that a new order would be founded, with himself at the head, which would officially be granted the wealth of the Templars. There would be something of a concession to Philip, however, as local monarchs would be permitted the chance to recoup the money they had spent on the arrests, torture, and prosecution of the Templars, figures which might seem to have been plucked out of thin air. This desire to please everyone by the church would form the basis of a campaign to launch a new Crusade in the future.

So, while the treatment of the Templars was different across Europe, it was the situation in Great Britain that pertains most to the story we're telling. And in England, the change in monarch was notable. The transition from one of the country's strongest kings to one of its weakest plays a big role in the tale.

There are many stories about King Edward II of England. One of the best known concerns the teenage king's love life, with many historians speculating that his true love was not the French princess to whom he was betrothed, but a young man named Piers Gaveston. Their blossoming homosexual romance had escaped Edward I's attention while the older king fought fiercely against Scotland. The relationship would eventually become a wedge driven between father and son, with the anger strong enough to prompt Edward I to strike his son and drag him around a room by his hair. Eventually, Gaveston was banished.

Naturally, the new King Edward II's first act was to recall his lover from banishment. The move set the tone for the new reign, with the king's council vying for power. Gaveston's role in this was to mock his lover's advisors, causing consternation throughout the aristocracy of the country. This proved to be a distraction when the papal orders filtered through. While Clement V demanded that the court deal with the Templars, those in power were too distracted by the question of how to deal with Piers Gaveston. Against this backdrop, Robert the Bruce was resuming his war for independence and the upcoming wedding between Edward and Isabella of France was occupying the thoughts of many.

The pope and Philip both petitioned the English to hurry up in their prosecution of the Templars. The new king seemed reluctant to believe the charges, though. His father had been a strong advocate and ally of the Templars and their presence was a notable part of the young prince's childhood. He believed the charges to be false and wrote to other monarchs around Europe asking for their support on the matter. Before they could reply, the official papal decree reached him and Edward was left with no choice.

That's not to say he acted immediately, however. A period of months existed between receiving the decree and persecuting the English Templars. It was more than enough time for the Templars to make plans. When the king's men eventually rode out from London to track down the Templars, they found the knights had simply vanished. Only a few stragglers were caught. Furthermore, the records kept by the order had vanished with them. Even the Templars' treasure seemed to have disappeared. When the officers entered the Templars London headquarters, expecting to find a huge amount of wealth, they found less than £200, a fraction of what was expected.

At the same time, King Edward II had also vanished. He had departed to France to be married to the young Princess Isabella (twelve years old at the time) and had left Gaveston in charge. That meant that Gaveston—to the horror of the nobles—was not only ruling the kingdom but was in charge of the prosecution of the Templars. He didn't seem to care for the task and the attempts to capture any Templars in the months following the papal decree were half-hearted. Of the few who were captured, some even managed to escape. Either there was a properly organized escape plan held by the Templars, or the people conducting the pursuit had little taste for the prosecution. In likelihood, it was a combination of both.

In England, those Templars that were captured were not tortured. Though they remained incarcerated by the time Edward returned to the country and afterwards, they were not subjected to the same horrors that befell those captured Templars on the continent. This riled the pope to the point where he sent his own torturers over to England to carry out the task, as well as threatening excommunication for anyone who helped the Templars in any way. Even though Edward placed some restrictions on the torturers working in England—no mutilations, for example—he nevertheless bowed to the ultimate papal authority. While this seemed to bring no confession out of the few Templars in prison, it had the effect of driving the hidden members even further from the gaze of authorities gaze.

While England eventually acquiesced to the pope's whims, Scotland was a different story. The pope tried and failed to have Templars in Scotland arrested. Indeed, despite the fact that Robert the Bruce did make a few

perfunctory arrests in the first month of 1308, his on-going military struggles meant that—when confronted with a trained and useful military man such as an armored knight—he was more prone to recruitment than punishment. Robert was disinterested in any potential Crusade, didn't care about monastic military organizations, cared not for Philip of France or the pope, and was aware that trouble was brewing down south as Edward II prepared to resume his father's campaign to quell Scottish independence. To that end, he had allegedly cast aside the papal decree concerning the Templars. It was never announced in Scotland. As such, it seemed that Scotland was a legal sanctuary for any fleeing Templars.

That meant that, should any Templar knight find himself in a difficult legal situation down in England or Europe, he could not only expect to find haven in Scotland, but he might well be welcomed with open arms, providing he was willing to join Robert the Bruce's military. Given that the Scottish cavalry at the time was supposedly poor in numbers and quality, trained and equipped knights were essential.

By 1313, England was in a precarious position. A longstanding issue with Piers Gaveston and the nobles had eventually led to the king's lover being executed. As the nobles tried to reassert influence over Edward II, the king's father-in-law—Philip of France—advised that he should ratify his allegiance to the church. This meant embarking on the Vatican's newly announced Crusade. A year earlier, the same council which had official disbanded the Templars once and for all announced an attempt to reclaim the Holy Land in the name of Christendom. Despite England ostensibly pledging to help, to do so would have been suicidal. Sending off the country's best fighting men when Robert the Bruce stared down from Scotland would have undone all the progress Edward I had worked so hard to achieve. Even while the Crusade was announced, Robert was moving through Scotland and steadily reclaiming castle after castle. If Edward wanted to reclaim his authority in the kingdom—and if he wanted to use a successful military campaign to do so—then the Crusades were not the opportunity he needed. Instead, he would have to fight the Scottish.

And so Edward rallied a force of 25,000 men to march north and dominate Scotland once and for all. In his army, the king of England had 5,000 cavalry and 10,000 archers. In response, Robert the Bruce was able to muster 10,000 troops. But Robert knew the English were coming. Long before Edward and his army arrived, the Scottish could carefully select the battlefield. As the English marched mile after mile, making themselves tired and hungry, the Scottish dug in and made sure they were well fed and refreshed. As it happened, Robert placed his army on the spot between the advancing English from the south and one of the few remaining English outposts in the region, Stirling Castle. This meant Edward would not be able to resupply before he met the Scottish army.

When it came to planning the battle, Robert drew on everything he had learned from William Wallace. He dug potholes across the field to hinder the English armed knights and hid men with twelve foot spears to take down the horses that might charge the Scots. These he hid under cover, camouflaging their presence. Wallace had been betrayed when his own cavalry, led by one of the disgruntled nobles, had abandoned him at a vital moment. Not wishing to fall to the same fate, Robert placed himself at the head of Scotland's small band of armored knights. According to the legend, the core of these cavalry men were made up of fugitive Templars, men who had fled north and accordingly sworn allegiance to Robert. The battle would allow them to exact some modicum of revenge on the man who had betrayed them to the pope.

It was a famous Scottish victory. As the English army was outflanked, they turned and fled. The deciding moment had come when the followers of the Scottish camp—the women, boys, and other non-combatants—had suddenly decided to take up arms and swarm the English, who assumed this to be a fresh wave of Scottish reinforcements. The fleeing army was routed, with England losing as many as 15,000 men compared to Scottish losses of just 4,000. The Scottish victory was so resounding that it would put an end to English rule over Scotland for close to 400 years.

In addition, the sheer scale of the English defeat left Edward II's kingdom in anarchy. Ambitious nobles, disgusted by their ruler's ineptitude, began to

take on more power for themselves. Across the country, the collapse of law and order meant that bands of outlaws began to roam free. It became the time of the feted outlaw heroes, men such as Robin Hood who fought against the corrupt rulers and preyed on the wealthy. Eventually, the ramifications of the defeat would be so violent for Edward II that he would lose his throne. Not only would he no longer be king, but he was betrayed by his wife and his nobles, the former summoning a mercenary army and the latter welcoming said army warmly. By 1327, on the 22nd of September, Edward was executed. Such was the humor of the executioners when dealing with the homosexual king that they choose one final insult. The method of execution involved thrusting a red hot iron spit directly up Edward's rectum. In his place, Edward III—at the time still a teenager – would take over the throne. It would be Edward III's successful reign which would set the scene for the eventual Peasants' Revolt.

So where does this leave the Templars and the Freemasons? According to the legend, they would be found in Scotland. So disastrous was the reign of Edward II that not only did he lose Scotland for centuries, but his actions were essential in driving the outlawed Templars north. Once they arrived, they would have needed to remain in secret. After all, their very existence was deemed an affront to god. But their riches, their military expertise, and their very presence were a boon to the Scottish king. So, with the need to remain in hiding, the hidden Templars would need to repurpose their organization. They were no longer a military order of knights, as such, but were now a clandestine secret society. They had an agenda, with vengeance that needed to be inflicted. Still very much fugitives, their mind set would have needed to have changed from men on the run to those in hiding, from world domineering men of power to cold and calculating power players. As they moved behind the scenes, the Templars would have needed to become a powerful secret society. Still maintaining their ambitions, could they have become the Great Society which would trouble England seven decades later?

Fugitives

On paper, the flight of the Knights Templar was well set up to succeed. Those Templars in England, Cyprus—and most places other than Italy and France—were given as many as three months in which they could plan their escape. Add to this the wealth, the political connections, and the means of transportation (especially the fleet) the Templars possessed and it's easy to see why so many people believe that the order possessed the organization necessities needed to escape persecution. Obviously, a number of the higher profile Templars were executed, and many hundreds of members were both tortured and killed. But on the whole, the attempt to totally annihilate the Templars seemed to have failed.

But that didn't meant the Templars had it easy. They had been officially outlawed by the church. This seemingly meant a blanket ban across Europe. All of Christendom was seemingly antithetical to their presence, as decreed by the pope. All around was enemy territory. Given that a huge proportion of the land in Europe was owned by various church-affiliated groups, none of whom were particularly beholden to the Templars, most areas were dangerous for members. Add in the fact that they would have stood out among the locals by their dress, their hairstyles, their mannerisms, and even the fact that they were chiefly a French speaking society, meant that going into hiding would have been more than difficult.

This meant that a fugitive Templar would need assistance. If he was to pass under a new identity — as would surely be essential—then he would need someone to vouchsafe for his new character. At a time when towns and cities were far smaller than they are today (London, for example, was a city of 25,000 and the biggest in England) that would have to be done on a personal level. The Templars needed friends.

It is here that we see a striking similarity between what the Templars suddenly required and one of the most ancient rules of Freemasonry. Known as one of the Old Charges of the Masons, the rule states that no

brother should go “into a town” unless he can do so in the presence of another brother who can vouchsafe him, or “witness” on his behalf. Given the authorities held the power to arrest strangers who received no such backing, there is clear historical precedent for an old rule which is now dealt with in mostly a figurative sense. Indeed, the five years which passed between the first announcement of the pope’s anti-Templar order and the final, official dissolution of the organization, plus the slowed down or delayed process undertaken in certain countries, there would have been more than enough time for the Templars to erect a secret structure of checks and balances. Code words and pass phrases could denote trust, with their existence easily spread through the Templar community before they went into hiding. By the time the authorities finally came looking for them, these checks and balances could help the outlawed Templars remain hidden.

We should take an extra moment to mention one of the biggest mysteries of the Templars. What happened to their fleet? The ships which departed from La Rochelle made up one of Europe’s wealthiest armadas, but seemed to simply vanish. The fleet had arrived in France to bring grand master Jacques de Molay to the pope, whereupon he would be arrested. But when the authorities went to find the Templar ships, they had vanished. Their presence is not recorded in the chronicles of any other French port, nor are they mentioned as having docked in the Thames or any other major port.

There has been much speculation over what happened to these ships. For those Templars who were on board, not only were the galleys a valuable asset in and of themselves, but they also provided the perfect means to evade the authorities. They could be sailed anywhere, while still providing a living space at the same time. If they so desired, the Templars could simply have lived aboard their ships, making land occasionally only to replenish their supplies, and even that could be done in any smaller, less visible port. The ships even provided the Templars with the chance to make a living, as they happened to be the ideal vessels for high seas piracy. Should they be so inclined, the military minds of the newly-outlawed Templars could have easily used their ships to board others in the Mediterranean or even raided the coast. As a side note, there is a confusing section of the initiation ceremony of the modern Master Mason, in which the man pledged to make

himself a brother to “pirates and corsairs.” It seems a strange entry in the Masonic rules, but some have pointed towards this as being a link to the missing Templar fleet. While worth noting, however, this is almost entirely speculation.

For some people, however, the fate of the Templar fleet ties neatly into the story that we are trying to uncover. There has been much written about what happened to the ships after they departed La Rochelle, as well as what they were carrying. Though the most imaginative end of the spectrum often contains flights of fancy such as the Holy Grail and other religious relics, it’s worth noting that the wealth and knowledge of the Templars was likely far more traditional. They were a wealthy group, with members sourced from every country and every social group. They knew a great deal about a great many people. When the ships vanished, that information resided within the members. Accordingly, many believe that this wealth and knowledge would be combined with another society, merging together the nascent principles of a band of stone masons with the recently forbidden knowledge of the Templars. For some people, the missing Templar fleet provides the catalyst for the notion that the order combined with the fledging Freemasons. But could a fugitive group such as the Knights Templar really have combined with a seemingly random collection of stone masons?

Taken at face value, the idea that the Knights Templar and the Freemasons share a common heritage seems to be incredible and almost unbelievable. Here we have two of the most notorious secret societies in history, the idea that they might be linked somehow seems to be nothing more than wishful thinking. But, over the course of this book, we have looked at the background of medieval Europe, and England in particular, as being the ideal melting pot for any number of clandestine groups. Shared resentments, similar patterns, and a mysterious history unite both groups. But there is something more than just pure speculation linking the two societies.

The traditional history of the Freemasons holds that their fraternities emerged from a guild-like organization that regulated and promoted the

works of tradesmen. This is perfectly conceivable and, indeed, much evidence exists to demonstrate that there is a great deal of truth to the matter. But it is not incompatible with the idea that the Templars had an influence on the fledgling masonry guilds. Take, for example, the Old Charge of Freemasonry, one of the organization's oldest pledges. The rule requires members to promise that they will reveal no secret of any fellow member which might eventually lead said member to lose either his life of his property. For an organization which existed to promote and protect tradesmen and their skillsets, this rule doesn't make much sense. For a fugitive Templar, it is absolutely essential. There are free secrets held by the stonemasons which might have endangered someone's life or their property, while secrets were often a matter of life and death for those in any way associated with the Templars.

So a theory emerges. This theory suggests that the Templars, fugitives on the run from the authorities, somehow merged with the earliest iterations of the Freemasons. Accordingly, such a merger resulted in many Templar rituals and ideas being inserted into the rules and charges of the Freemasons. It seems outrageous on the surface, but taking a closer look at some of the historical records can reveal an increasing amount of support for this theory.

Let's take a look at the three organizations who might be regarded, in the 14th Century, as being the enemies of the Knights Templar. These were: the monarchy, the church, and the Knights Hospitallers. Of these three enemies, it is perhaps the church which presented the biggest challenge to the fugitive Templars. For their entire existence, the Knights Templar had been a religious organization. Christianity was baked into the very foundation of the order, who answered only to the pope and, thus, to God. But the Templars had been betrayed by the very man they answered to. The church had declared them to be outlaws and heretics. While they might have retained a belief in God, the Templars had been cut off from their supposed leader, their grand master having been burned alive by the pope himself.

In the medieval mind-set, trying to balance a fervent belief in God's existence with this kind of betrayal must have been difficult. In complete

secrecy, it seems unsurprising that the Templars might have grown to resent the institution of the Catholic Church, and hated the corruption and greed that it had come to represent. But these thoughts were necessarily private. At the time, there was no alternative. The Vatican held a monopoly on belief in Western Europe. Though the seeds of what would become the Protestant Reformation had been planted, they were yet to blossom into a real Christian alternative. The very fact that the Templars were able—or, in actual fact, forced—to entertain such thoughts in complete secrecy became key to their resentment of the church and how this manifested.

As such, we should look at the Freemasons' and their comprehension of religion. In the Freemasons, there is one single point which has formed the foundation of the society as a whole. That is, the central tenet around which all other rules and regulations revolve. Before being considered a member, a Freemason must assert his belief that there exists one Supreme Being. But, beyond this initial belief, religious matters are not regulated. How the individual practices such belief is not a concern of the Freemasons. Indeed, members are forbidden from discussing their beliefs when inside the Lodge and are forbidden from trying to convert other Masons to their particular viewpoint. This central rule of Freemasonry is both essential and ancient. It is the one rule which has lasted longer than any other. It is the foundation of Freemasonry.

It is easy to see how such a rule intersects with the idea of Templar influence. At the time, religious beliefs of a stonemason or tradesmen would not matter. Indeed, with the church simply being a domineering force, everyone would simply be expected to follow the Vatican's guidance. Such a rule would be, seemingly, unnecessary. But for the Templars, thrust into a world of self-doubt and resentment, a rule made sense. As a monastic order, they would not have relinquished their belief in God. But recent experiences with the Vatican would not only have opened their minds to alternative forms of religious practice, but would have made it a danger for them to have discussed such matter. Better instead that, aside from being assured that all members believed in a Supreme Being, religious matters were not discussed within the society. Such a rule provided a greater degree

of protection for possible Templars than it might have done for any stone masons.

It's possible to draw such links consistently when looking through the ancient precepts of Freemasonry. Many of the society's oldest rules and regulations seem to be perfectly suited to fostering fugitive Templars from the authorities and integrating them into the organization. But, and this should be stated numerous times, trying to find historical evidence for such a tie remains elusive. There exists no one definitive document or record which suggests that there was a secret society founded by fugitive members of the Knights Templar. Thus, the majority of the links we discover and the theories we devise remain theoretical. But that does not put an end to the investigation.

Trying to figure out the Masonic comprehension of religion, for example, is still difficult. Medieval guilds were ostensibly religious organizations. They were, as evidenced throughout Europe, devoted to the church. They had patron saints, they staged religious plays and performances, they donated to local churches, they commissioned religious artworks, they would often help members go on pilgrimages, they would occasionally proclaim to own holy relics, and they would be tightly tied into the fabric of their local community in a way which worked in tandem with the church. This was not just true of almost every stone masons' guild, but almost every guild throughout Europe. So why should one particular guild develop such a secular, secretive approach to religious notions? Why would a guild of stone masons seemingly develop a rule which not only presupposed Christianity but allowed for members of other religions, too?

Indeed, the only people excluded by the Freemasons' rule seems to be atheists, a religious position almost alien to the medieval mind. When looking at the history of the Masons, it's just one example of how more and more questions emerge the closer you look. That the existence of a Templar influence seems to answer so many of these questions so perfectly hints towards a theory which is almost impossible to prove. Such a rule, it's obvious, would be ideal for the fugitive Templars who needed protection from their society and a means of expressing their sudden religious doubts.

Now enemies of the church but retaining their religious position as a monastic order, these fleeing Templars were the perfect beneficiaries of the Freemasons' rule. When piecing together the jigsaw, the facts all slide neatly into place.

Let us again look at the simple facts of the matter before drawing any conclusions:

- The Knights Templar had been outlawed by the Catholic Church, the organization to which they had supposedly devoted their lives.
- The members were given enough time to prepare themselves for hiding and possessed great resources, skills, and knowledge which would facilitate such a move.
- Following the papal decree, the Templars had good reason to resent the church, the monarchy, and the Knights Hospitaller.
- Scotland, due to political reasons, provided the Templars with a perfect place to hide.
- Around the end of the 14th Century, there begun to exist a secret society whose members referred to themselves as Masons.
- Though supposedly emerging from one of the many trade guilds that existed in medieval Europe, there is no documented evidence of the exact origin of said secret society.
- The so-called Freemasons and their rules seemed to be perfectly ideologically suited to fugitive Templars who wished to evade detection.
- Many of these rules would have been irrelevant to the day-to-day life of a stone mason in the late 14th Century.
- Both the Freemasons and the Knights Templar share an identification with the Temple of Solomon as being important to their beliefs.
- Behind the organization of the Peasants' Revolt was a so-called Great Society, who seemed to provide structural advice and backing to the rebellion.

- The Peasants' Revolt targeted institutions, properties, and resources which were owned and operated by groups and organizations who would be considered enemies of the Knights Templar.
- No members of the Great Society were ever caught and formally tried.

When working through the points, it seems clear that it's possible to draw a line through the facts and emerge with a theory that the Knights Templar, on the run from the authorities, was able to have an influence on the founding principles of what would eventually become Freemasonry. These ideas manifested themselves during the Peasants' Revolt before vanishing back into the ether. Moving through all of the similarities and parallels between the Freemasons and the fugitive Templars would take more space than is available in this book, though one is left with the notion that there is much more to the idea than is supported by the scant evidence we have from the period. After all, the very defining feature of a secret society is that it is, in fact, secret. Trying to uncover the truth from a distance of six centuries is almost impossible. But that does not mean that speculation and investigation is not possible.

Instead, we should leave this concept firmly in our mind and move on to the early history of the Freemasons. Throughout these next sections of the book, it can help to remember just how exactly a Templar influence in the Freemasons might have dictated the organization's ideological course or helped nudge them in a certain direction. While we are left without much in the way of definitive physical evidence, the majority of this book has thus far worked to establish the idea that such a connection is not impossible. As we move through to the ending, the journey thus far should illuminate what is to come. While we might not be able to answer the question of what happened to the Knights Templar, we can ask whether the early years of the Freemasons could possibly have been influenced by such a group.

The Birth of the Freemasons

These days, the Freemasons are a global concern. Not in the conspiratorial sense, whereby the Masons are blamed (or credited) with any manner of geopolitical events. Rather, they are a global organization. Indeed, the Freemasons are the largest fraternal organization anywhere on the planet. Their members total nearly three million in the USA alone. In Britain, considered the birthplace of Masonry, there are as many as 700,000 members. Around the world, there is a million more. Such an organization attracts interest, which is why as many as fifty thousand pieces of literature have been produced concerning the Freemasons, from books to pamphlets to magazine articles to websites. The book you are reading right now is just one of many texts which attempt to examine some aspect of Freemasonry. It is, as mentioned, a global concern.

The world has changed since 1312, when the Knights Templar was formally dissolved. It has changed since 1381, when the Peasants' Revolt took place. It has changed since 1717, when the Freemasons decided to officially reveal themselves to the world. These days, the Freemasons are an entirely different organization from what came before. Though they might still wear the dressings of the original secret society, the sheer interest and information available to the wider population means that they are something of a shadow of their former selves. This book is not interested in modern Masonry, such as it is. Instead, we want to know more about the origins of the Freemasons and how they might have been influenced.

One of the most difficult parts of examining the history of the Masons is the books written by actual members. Over the years, there have been efforts by writers to not only included seemingly any influential historical figure as a noted member, but also to place early Masonic branches in places such as ancient Egypt, Celtic Britain, and Persia. At one time, it seemed as though the Masonic scholars were competing to see what outrageous claims they could make and get away with. These days, such inclinations have died

down, but have left the waters muddied for those of us who seek to know the truth.

Over time, the historians have gradually retreated in their claims. After the dalliances with ancient history, there were claims that linked the first Masons with the founding of the Temple of Solomon (establishing a link between the Masons and the Templars) which was based on a few lines in the Master Mason's initiation ceremony. But historical links with the actual Temple of Solomon (and how it is described in the bible) do not correlate with the lines in the ritual. Instead, the lines seem more allegorical.

So while there is little evidence which links the founding of the Freemasons with Solomon's Temple, as conceded by modern Masonic historians, Templar influence is not precluded. Indeed, such links between the Temple of Solomon (the verified headquarters of the Templars following the First Crusade) and the Freemasons seem to be derived from medieval guilds. But why were medieval tradesmen, men who should have been more concerned with tools, techniques, and materials, delving into allegorical Christianity? Such matters only serve to raise more questions.

In fact, there are only really two organizations which claim the Temple of Solomon in common. They are the Freemasons and the Knights Templar. Is this a coincidence? Or is it the case of the demise of one such organization helping foster the rise of the other, sharing with it several key beliefs and approaches, as well as resources, tactics, enemies, and ideologies?

The circumstances certainly seem to suggest that this was the case. The Templars in England had a great deal of time to prepare themselves in 1307, matched by the fact that the newly crowned King Edward II was one of the weakest and most ineffective in the country's history. Such men would have been welcomed across the border in Scotland but would have needed to remain hidden.

Indeed, such was the delay between the beginning and the official end of the persecution of the Templars by the church—lasting seven years, from 1307 to 1314—that those Templars who were driven into hiding would have had their secretive bonds forged together. Over seven years in hiding, these hidden fugitives could have become like brothers, their structure and organization growing more formal and codified by the day. By the time the persecution of the Templars had officially ended, those in hiding may have morphed into a brand new secret society, one which remembered the wrongs of the past. With resentment of the church, the crown, and the Hospitallers as their natural focus, the fugitive Templars found themselves in possession of a new organization, more secretive than before, one which could have made its base in Scotland.

The signs and icons of Freemasonry are easily explained by the existence of the Templars. The square and compass logo, for example, is strikingly similar to the seal of Solomon that represented the Templars original home. One need only remove the horizontal lines from the Templar seal to discover a simple interpretation of the Masonic symbol. Elsewhere, around the typical Masonic Lodge, one might see the circles and mosaics which were shared in common with Templar iconography. The clothing worn during Masonic rituals, the oaths taken, the colors, the signs, and almost everything else about the rituals of the Freemasons can be tied to the Knights Templar.

Historians have uncovered many examples of the rules and orders of tradesmen guilds from across medieval Europe. Often, these are dry and uninteresting pieces. They lay out the terms for membership and so on. Never do they seem anything like the ordinances of the Freemasons. Instead, it seems as though the Freemasons rules are best not interpreted literally. Rather, they are figurative lessons, a cover story which allowed for the existence of what was ostensibly a guild but had a secret purpose: to conceal the remaining members and ideas of the Knights Templar.

There were even certain groups within the Masons who, in the 18th Century, would take the name ‘Knights Templar’ to recognize a high-ranking, exclusively Christian group within the Freemasons. These kinds of links are undeniable, though it is difficult to say how much is original and how much was devised later by the Masons and constructed purposefully in remembrance and deference to the Templars. Rather, the best evidence is often found at the brief moment between the fall of the Templars and the rise of the secret Masonic Lodges.

Over time, as the Templars died out and new recruits were added, such an organization morphed and evolved. The mutual protection offered by the codes and rules led to agendas and grudges being carried over. Before the group was even formally known as the Freemasons—when they were still an almost completely secret society—they almost emerged into the public consciousness when wreaking havoc on their old enemies during the

Peasants' Revolt. As such, the Peasants' Revolt is one of the key moments in this story, as it shows us the best example of the secret society which existed in between the Templars and the Masons, a group which was still evolving and maturing. That it should only have been known as the Great Society seems to reveal such change, as well as how little anyone really knew about the group.

But, as ever, these ideas must be tempered by the very legitimate expectation for evidence. While the facts may all seem to align and corroborate with this theory, there is a lack of physical proof. In these terms, aside from the whisperings about the Great Society, we are left with a period from the beginning of the 14th Century to the beginning of the 18th Century in which the last official documentation of the Templars fades and the official emergence of the Freemasons begins. So how should we examine this gap and what does it mean for the theory?

Again, we can connect the dots and evidence of a type does begin to emerge. We return once again to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, simply because it was a time when these secret machinations we are attempting to discuss seemed to rise so close to the surface. There are hints of Mason and Templar activity in the motivations and actions of the rebels. The targeting of the Hospitallers, the executions of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the ease with which they strode into the Tower of London, the protection accorded the Templar church, and the occasion mention of the so-called Great Society. All of these can be linked in some way to one of the two (or even both) organizations. Walter the Tyler, with his Masonic-influenced name, seemed to direct the rebellion in a military manner, something familiar to the Templars. As the head of a secret society—one with seemingly incredible resources, knowledge, and influence—Tyler could well have been one of the earliest Masons of the last Templars.

Even in the time after the Peasants' Revolt, the existence in England of the Lollards (a religiously motivated secret society whose existence we have neither the time nor the space to cover in great depth) hints at a group operating behind the conventional structures of government, away from the official records. The man who succeeded the executed Archbishop of

Canterbury after the Revolt went so far as to identify the Lollards in 1382, especially through his attempts to have the group destroyed. But the Lollards—in one form or another—survived. We know more about the Lollards over the course of the next two centuries, with their structure and organization having been documented in real sources. Though they were seemingly unconnected to the Freemasons or the Templars, their existence is proof in itself that a secret society could function and exist in medieval England. Their existence continued through the medieval age and into the time of the Reformation. Every now and then, they would spring into action, such as the time in 1414 when Sir John Oldcastle led a revolt against the crown.

There are many similarities between the Lollards and the Freemasons, but perhaps the most important fact concerning the Lollards is simply that they existed at all. As such, we have hard evidence that a secret society could not only operate in England but that they could wield great power. Evidence such as Henry Kingston's documented account of Lollard movements in Leicester reveals a group who had taken St. John as their patron saint (the same as the Freemasons) and named themselves for him, had held secret meetings, preached ideas similar to those held by the Masons (against lawsuits in the case of debt, for example), were protected by knights in the area, and were persecuted for heresy. This description of a Lollard cell provides not only a template for what could eventually become Freemasonry, but could even be construed as an early example of the same secret society in action. This could easily be the description of a 14th Century Masonic Lodge.

Such circumstantial evidence carries us through to the 17th Century. By this time, the Lollards had seemingly disbanded. Religious ideas in England were preoccupied by the Reformation but reports of secret societies had not ceased. The historian C. V. Wedgwood, for example, notes in a book about the reign of Charles I that there were reports from the Archbishop of Canterbury about secret meetings that were happening throughout the kingdom. This culminated in the arrest of a man named Trendall, who happened to be preaching against the church's hierarchy in London. It was the Archbishop's desire to burn the man at the stake, a means of punishing

heretics that was almost a generation out of date. Even though the Archbishop wrote to colleagues for advice on how to conduct the burning, it never seems to have taken place. Trendall seems to have escaped the punishment. Maybe he had friends in high places. All we know for sure is that he gave his profession as a stone mason.

It's similarly possible to chart the existence of Masonic principals as they become increasingly common in the work of noted public figures. Both John Locke and Francis Bacon, for example, included in their works numerous ideas and notions that have direct ties to Freemasonry. These could be incredibly specific—such as Locke's incorporation into the constitution of South Carolina prohibitions against filing lawsuits to retrieve money—or more general—such as Bacon's ideas about religion and science which echoed Masonic viewpoints, especially visible in his work titled the New Atlantis, which seems to imagine an entire society built in secret along Masonic principles. There are many such references throughout the 15th, 16th, and 17th Centuries to Masonic ideas in literature. While these might seem circumstantial, they can be used to demonstrate how the Freemasons were having a growing influence in England at the time.

The idea that the Templars might have influenced the Freemasons is not a new one. Indeed, the history of the Freemasons just after they went public was rife with accusations of Templar influence. The Rite of Strict Observance, for example, was a German branch of the Freemasons set up in the 18th Century which explicitly reorganized the structure of the Lodge and renounced the Templar origins of the Masons. In the view of the Strict Observance members, the Templar fugitives had travelled to Scotland and allied with a stone mason guild. Several hundred years later, this short lived branch of the masons rejected this supposed Templar influence. It was hardly intrinsic to the history of the Freemasons, but it demonstrates the notion as having existed long before this book.

Others have suggested that the occasional proposals of the links between the Freemasons and the Knights Templar are anything from a Jesuit plot designed to discredit the Masons, to a plot device used in novels and something which can therefore be dismissed. Often, such ideas depend on

the acceptance that the Templars were indeed guilty of all of the false charges levelled against them by Prince Philip of France and the Vatican. As such, it can usually be read as an attempt to discredit the Freemasons by making them guilty by association, an allegation that depends upon a falsified version of history.

But the idea persists. Even without evidence beyond the circumstantial, there are those who are convinced either way. People can be certain that the Templars founded the Masons or that there is no truth to the matter at all. Typically, those who are the most convinced in either direction tend to shout the loudest and remain the most vehement. But the most damaging aspect of the frequent arguments over the validity of the claim is that it seems to have endangered any real investigation into the matter. So adamant are the naysayers that no such link exists between the two secret societies, that our chances of ever learning the complete truth are surely diminished. Furthermore, the outlandish claims often concerning the Masons and the Templars—often those which lean in a more conspiratorial direction—can serve to discredit the notion in the public's mind. Even those theories that are demonstrably false and built on zero evidence—that the Freemasons were alive and present among the Celtic Druids, for example—only serve to muddy the waters when we try to find the verifiable facts behind the story.

However, there is no doubt that the Freemasons of today are different when compared to the Freemasons of the 18th Century (or before). Today, their society is no longer secret. There are a great many books about the modern Masons which can help teach you everything, right down to the exact wording of the rituals themselves. It's only in the past, when we look towards history, that any true mystery surrounds the Freemasons. Of all the mysteries, it is their origin and their birth which will always remain the strangest and the most controversial. These days, being a member of the Freemasons is often a social pastime, even when ascending into ranks which explicitly reference the Knights Templar. Though the story of the Templars is told, the members are no longer concerned with vengeance or similar notions. While they are told the story, it seems to be a perfunctory retelling, rather than something meant to inspire or educate. Nowadays, the

true importance of the Templars to the Freemasons is lost amongst the ocean of ritual, just another part of the history for which there is a thousand and one explanations. Unfortunately, the truth is hard to come by.

Conclusion

In the earliest days of the Christian faith, true believers had to keep their faith a secret. Banned from practicing their religion, they were one of the best examples of a secret society. To communicate with one another, they took logos. The image of a fish—the simple shape which is still used today — became a calling card for fellow Christians. It also provided them with a cover story, allowing anyone with a fish image to simply say that they were a fisherman rather than a member of an outlawed religion. Even after Christianity became an accepted practice, the image of the fish remained. The meaning changed, essentially, as it was no longer the calling card for a secret society. The fish was once a cover story, a means of staying alive when being hunted by the authorities. In many ways, it is a parallel to the idea of the Templars and the Freemasons.

As we have seen in this book, there exists a huge amount of circumstantial evidence that suggests that the fall of the Knights Templar coincided with the founding of a secret society in Great Britain. The fugitive Templars could well have allied themselves to a small Scottish guild of masons, taking on their icons and symbols as a cover story that allowed them to escape the persecuting eye of the authorities. Just as a guild might protect trade secrets, the Freemasons were founded to protect the lives of the Templars on the run. The ideas that they maintained and carried with them went on to form the foundation of the Freemason ideology which would persist into the present day. Though modern Freemasonry is not secret in much the same way that Christianity grew to be mainstream, the lasting legacy of the Templar influences remains in place just as the symbol of the fish is evident in almost every church around the world. Though the modern organization is entirely different, it does not hurt to remember the past.

In this book, we have not ventured into the territory of the conspiracy theory. Modern Masonic writing is often too obsessed with the idea of the secret society and how they might run the world from some clandestine bunker. But—just as this is almost certainly untrue—is does not do justice

to the most interesting aspects of the Masons' history. The involvement of the Knights Templar in the founding of the Freemasons is not something we can prove, though we can detect hints and suggestions as we look at history. Instead of regarding the Freemasons as some modern threat, we should look instead to their past and how they were shaped by events centuries ago. The truth of the link between the Knights Templar and the Freemasons might never be known, but we know enough to whet the appetite. When investigating a secret society, this is more than can ever be expected.

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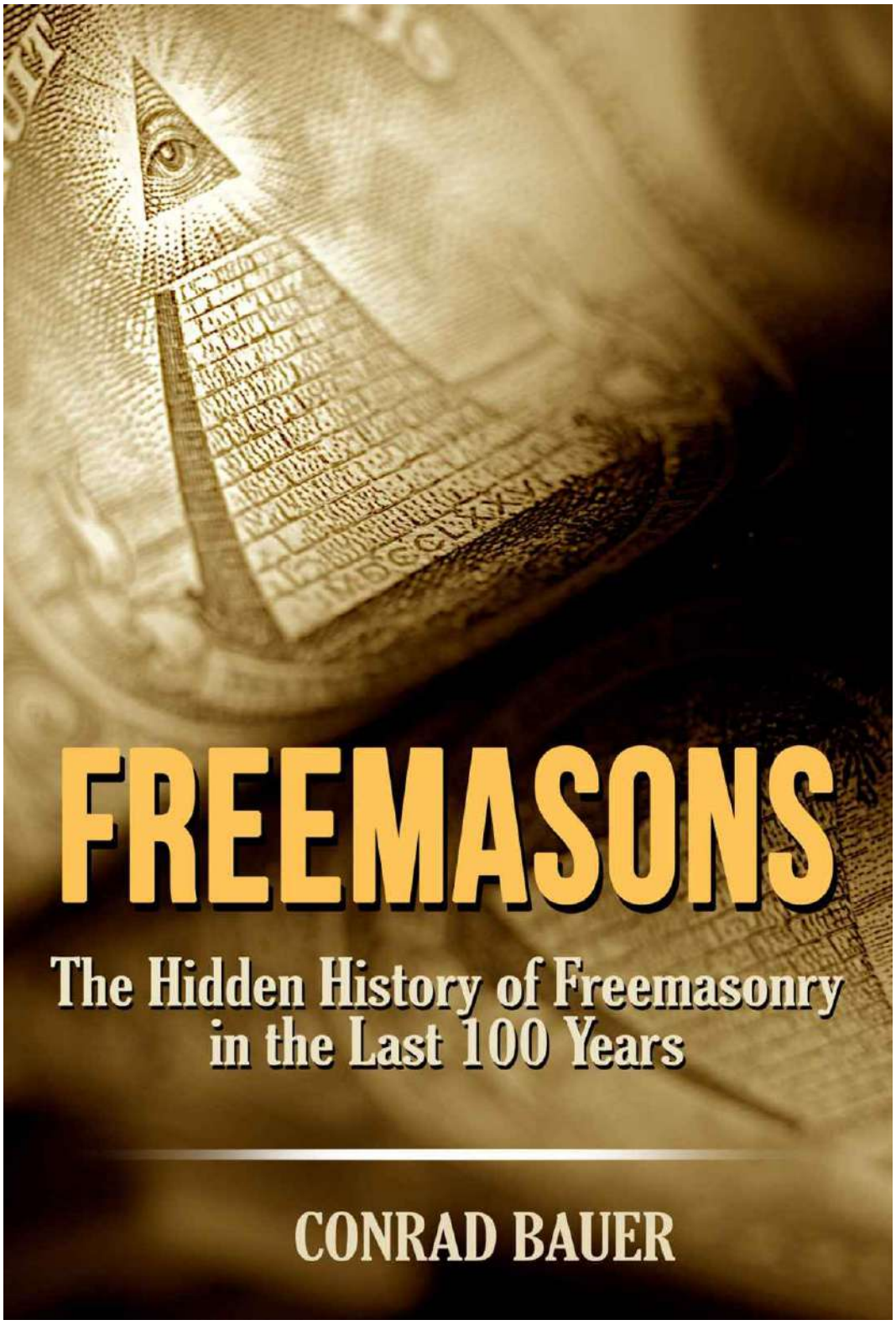
FREEMASONS
The Hidden History of Freemasonry in the Last 100 Years
CONRAD BAUER

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Avant-Propos

In their three centuries of official existence, Freemasons have been routinely praised and despised, regularly cheered and derided. Some believe that they are a fraternal organization that promotes leadership and good character, while others are convinced that they are a secretive cabal hell-bent on world domination. Mason-backed organizations such as the Shriners are praised for their charitable giving, while other lodges are held in contempt for their secretiveness.

When it comes to stark dichotomies such as this, the argument to moderation would indicate that the truth lies somewhere in between. Well, fallacious as that argument is, Freemasonry would still be a riveting tale even if it *did* fall neatly between both sides of the equation!

In this book we will explore the last 100 years of Freemasonry, as well as the larger implications of Masonic influence and practice. We will also discuss Masonry's latest trends and probable future trajectory. So, if you don't know already—read this book to learn the full story of what really goes on in that quiet, nondescript little lodge on the corner! Because despite what your grandfather may have told you, there is more going on than card games, pancakes and fish fries! Here, in one concise chronological timeline, discover the last 100 years of Freemasonry!

The Roots of Freemasonry

The roots of Freemasonry have always been shrouded in mystery, but many authorities trace them all the way back to the siege of Jerusalem in 1099 AD. This siege, waged by European invaders against Arab defenders, was set in motion by the Pope's call for a Crusade against the Muslim powers then occupying the Holy Land. The reasons behind this sudden Christian Crusade against Islam have long been hotly debated, and the narrative has frequently changed over the centuries in order to match the political aims of those telling the story.

To cut through some of the spin-doctoring and get a better understanding of this complicated backdrop, let's just lay out the bare-bones facts. First, you have to consider how many times the Holy Land has actually changed hands. The Jews controlled the region from about 1000 BC to 70 AD, after which it was the Roman Empire's turn. The Romans forcibly expelled most Jews after laying waste to Jerusalem and burning down the centerpiece of Judaism, the holy Temple. At this point in history, the Romans were pagans and not much interested in the Jews' monotheistic religion or the relics they left behind. This changed after a Roman Emperor named Constantine came to power in 306 AD. Constantine, initially a pagan himself, eventually turned toward Christianity, and with his conversion the entire Roman Empire followed suit.

In one of the most remarkable reversals in history, an Empire that had once fed Christians to the lions for entertainment in its arenas and coliseums became Christian itself. This revived interest in the Empire's Eastern frontier—the Middle Eastern lands Jesus had once walked—and this led to the building of new churches and infrastructure in these previously abandoned backwaters. In the coming centuries, however, the ancient superpower of Roman civilization began to wane, and as it weakened it became increasingly hard for it to protect its far-flung borders.

By 600 AD the rise of a powerful new religion called Islam forced the Roman Catholics from the Middle East. These erstwhile Christian lands were forcibly converted to Islam and placed under direct Muslim control. This was the status quo for the next few centuries, until in the year 1095 Pope Urban II issued a call to arms for a Crusade to drive the Muslim occupiers out.

The Pope actually sold his proposed military campaign as a counterattack, pointing out that it was the Muslims who had invaded and seized the land from Christians in the first place. Never mind the fact that this counterattack had been delayed by about 400 years; Christians were told that they would be rightfully retaking land that had been stolen from them. As the Pope presented it, the reasons for the Crusade were twofold.

First and foremost, the Pope was answering a distress call from his Christian brothers in the East. The remaining segment of the Eastern Roman Empire, which consisted of Greece, most of Anatolia (modern-day Turkey), and large parts of the Balkans, was on life support. In the face of renewed Muslim aggression, it was teetering on the verge of collapse. Now known as the Byzantine Empire, this Greek-speaking relic of Rome's former glory was being threatened with utter annihilation by encroaching Islamic armies. The Pope hoped to prevent this by raising an army to defend the Byzantines—and alongside this goal, he also floated the idea of reclaiming the Holy Land. It was this complicated backdrop that led to the siege and reconquest of Jerusalem by Christian armies in 1099.

So where in this complex tapestry of conquest, religion, and political intrigue do the Freemasons come in? Some say that nascent Freemasonry arrived on the shoulders of a special order of crusading knights who called themselves the Knights Templar. This band of warriors came to prominence shortly after the Christian takeover of Jerusalem, spurred by the need to protect the thousands of Christian pilgrims from Europe who were soon streaming into the city to see the land of Christ.

Because then as now, the Middle East could be a dangerous place. Most of these pilgrims were not fighters—many were not even armed—and as such

they made easy targets for thieves and revengeful Muslims alike. An armed escort of knights was deemed necessary to protect these spiritual seekers from the very real threat of physical harm, and the Templars were created for this express purpose.

Founded by a French knight named Hugues de Payens in 1119, the Templars were to be the perfect blend of spiritual and physical warriors. These men were basically to be an order of fighting monks who would risk life and limb to protect their fellow Christians. The name Templar is derived from the Temple Mount of Jerusalem—the site of the old Jewish Temple—which the young order of knights was given as their headquarters. (Why this newly established group was given such a prime piece of religious real estate upon which to set up shop has never been fully explained.) "Knights Templar" is actually a shortened version of their official title, which was the "Poor Knights of Christ and the Temple of Solomon". The biblical temple builder Solomon was an important figure for the Templars—and as we will see, Solomon is important to the Freemasons as well.

It has long been rumored that the Templars received a great secret when they took up residence in the Temple Mount. What the secret was isn't exactly clear, though—theories include everything from Solomon's treasure hoard to secret extra-biblical texts, and even the head of John the Baptist and the Holy Grail. It is perhaps due to the long history of such claims of miraculous finds that the military campaigns of the Crusades have become so conflated with treasure hunting.

But whatever secret treasure the Templars may have found, their primary mission was indeed a military one. They served as an elite strike force at the front lines of numerous engagements against Islamic revanchists. Ironically, as their esteem as protectors and guardians of the Holy Land grew, the "Poor Knights of Christ" began to become rather wealthy. Within a few decades the rich men of Europe were enthusiastically donating to their cause, giving the Knights a reliable source of income.

Not only that, the European upper class essentially began to use these trusted knights of Solomon's Temple as a kind of rudimentary banking system. They would temporarily hand over their assets to the order for safekeeping as they traveled to the Holy Land. These deposits soon added up to a large sum of money, and some believe that it is this more than anything that led to the Templars' eventual downfall. For the Templars were now powerful not only militarily; they had also become the financial masters of the European nobility. The leverage that this gave them over the kings and queens of Europe brought with it great resentment.

This resentment finally came to a head on the unlucky day of Friday the 13th of October in the year 1307. It was on that day that the Templars' French headquarters was stormed on express orders of Pope Clement V and King Philip IV of France. The official reason was charges of heresy, but considering the large amount of money that Philip owed to the Templars, it is easy to assume that his primary motive was a financial one.

The arrested Templars were sent to French dungeons and subjected to excruciating torture until many of them confessed to crimes they had most likely never even thought of—let alone committed. And whether they confessed to the charges or not, they were all eventually burned at the stake.

Pope Clement V, under continued pressure from Philip, disbanded the Knights Templar altogether five years later in 1312. The plotting of the Pope and the French King did not ensnare all of the Templars, however, and many managed to escape the dragnet that had been laid for them. So where did these survivors go? And just what became of them? Since most of Europe was now against them, they were forced to pick a nation still far enough off the beaten path to serve as their refuge—Scotland.

Scotland was so far removed from the affairs of its European counterparts —and even neighboring England—that when the Vatican issued orders to round up the remaining Templars, the Scots paid no attention whatsoever. Those involved in the manhunt for the outlawed Templars found that the trail grew cold after they fled to Scotland. And it is in the footsteps of these

fleeing Templars that we find the first whisperings of the institution we now call Freemasonry.

It is no coincidence that many of the grand lodges of Freemasonry are called “Scottish Rite” cathedrals. It all goes back to the Knights Templar and their last refuge. Because almost as soon as the Templars disappeared into Scotland, the roots of Freemasonry began to emerge.

Freemasonry Officially Begins

The Freemasons officially revealed themselves to the world on June 24, 1717, when their first grand lodge opened in Britain. On this Saint John's Day, four previous gathering spots—all local taverns—pooled their resources to create one grand lodge in which they could all meet. This first grand lodge officially became a "regulatory body" in 1721. And as the typical conspiracy narrative would have you believe, in the centuries since that great coming out party, the Masons have always had their finger on one manner of intrigue or another.

With famous members such as George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, it has been said that the very founding of the United States of America was a plot hatched in a Freemason lodge. When France erupted in revolution a few years later, the finger was pointed at the Freemasons once again. But is there any truth in any of these claims? Well—the one country where Masonic influence would be the hardest to deny would indeed be the United States of America.

It is true that many of the Founding Fathers were Freemasons, and a trip to the national capital will reveal all manner of Masonic regalia on display. From the Washington Monument all the way to the design of the Pentagon, the Masonic square and compass have been put to good use. George Washington, who is probably the most famous of Freemasons, joined the craft in 1753 when he was 21 years old. He later led America to independence as a revolutionary general before becoming the very first president of the fledgling republic.

This republic was still fractured from the war, however, and the very loosely written Articles of Confederation drafted in 1777 weren't nearly enough to keep the individual states from splitting off and going their separate ways. A constitutional convention was accordingly held to resolve differences and create a unified government. The delegates to this convention were all from different backgrounds and walks of life, but often enough the one thing that held them together was their mutual participation in Freemasonry. For better or worse, this was a tie that helped bind them together even as they sought to tie up the loose ends of the nation.

However, the purpose of this book is not to examine these historical connections. Our focus here is to uncover modern Freemasonry. The modern Freemasonry of the last 100 years has attempted to shed some of the intrigue of its past with a friendlier gentleman's club type atmosphere. Whole new charters have been written for modern-day Freemasons to teach them how to be more open and congenial in order to attract new members.

But at the very same time, it is Freemasonry's last century that seems to hold the most drama and intrigue. Even as the Masons are attempting to put

a fresh face on an old craft, as we will discover in the next few chapters of this book, there is still more than enough mystery to go around.

Freemasonry during World War One and its Aftermath

As the 20th century arrived, Masonic leadership was contemplating an expansion of the Masonic ideal on the world stage. At a Masonic convention in Paris in 1900, it was decided that the time was ripe for the implementation of a truly international Masonic order. This idea floated about French, British, and American Masonic lodges for the next couple of

years without much action being taken. Then, in 1903, a former Grand Master from Switzerland, Edouard Quartier-la Tente, decided to make the scheme his own personal pet project.

It is interesting to note that just as the Masons were attempting to achieve international solidarity, the international climate of the world at large was beginning to unravel. The imperialism of powerful nations such as Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Japan and the United States was setting the stage for powerful collisions in their respective spheres of self-interest.

It could be argued that the first salvo of what would become World War One was fired against Russia by the Japanese in 1905.And when Japan defeated this once great Imperial power, it was proof that the old-world order could indeed be changed.

Conspiracy theorists who see a secret society behind the scenes of every political intrigue can find links to the Freemasons in every changing breeze of history, but most of this is mere conjecture. But in 1914, when the outbreak of World War One was all but assured, the spark that lit the fuse was indeed struck by a secret society—a group who called themselves the Black Hand. This secret cabal instructed a team of young Serbs to assassinate a group of visiting foreign dignitaries in Sarajevo, Bosnia. They succeeded in killing Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire soon declared war on Serbia. This prompted Serbia's ally Russia to declare war on Austria-Hungary. And then, to make an incredibly long and complicated story short, due to a myriad of entangled alliances, practically all of the globe's great powers declared war on one another and were soon locked in a protracted struggle. This domino-effect downward spiral of worldwide conflict started with one lone terrorist associated with a secret society.

But who were the Black Hand? Wouldn't it be idle speculation to suggest that a group of Slavic radicals had any links to Freemasonry? Not so—if you were to ask the assassin himself. The very man who gunned down Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip, testified that he did so at the instigation of the Freemasons. He stated that one of his

handlers, a man named Cigonovich who was a Freemason himself, had informed him that the Archduke had been condemned to death by a Freemason lodge. The lodge that had allegedly delivered this death sentence was none other than the Grand Orient de France in Paris.

According to Princip's testimony, he was a hit man hired by the Freemasons, who had already made the Archduke a marked man for a Mafia-style hit. Many have since denied these claims of a Masonic connection to the lead up to World War One as nothing but the fantastical imaginings of a deranged assassin. But you do have to ask yourself, why would a man, already convicted, with nothing left to lose lie? Princip died in prison, and he went to his grave stating that the Freemasons were behind the crime that he carried out.

You also have to wonder if it was coincidence that the Freemasons proved to be crucial in rebuilding the shattered institutions of the post-war world. After the war, US President Woodrow Wilson led the way in establishing an international body to handle future disputes. Known as the League of Nations, this short-lived precursor to the United Nations was fleshed out by Wilson's close adviser "Colonel" Edward M. House, who was a 33rd degree Grand Lodge Freemason. The organization was founded on April 28, 1919, and people have speculated about possible Masonic infiltration ever since. Such misgivings aside, the League of Nations began operations on January 10, 1920, with the stated objective of ending all wars.

This aim proved to be a tough pill to swallow for Italian dictator Benito Mussolini after he forced his way to power in 1922. Mussolini initially had many friends and associates who were Freemasons, but after he and his Blackshirts marched on Rome and consolidated their power, it wasn't long before Mussolini became deeply suspicious of Italian Freemasonry. His campaign against the Masons began with strict restrictions upon the press (of which many high-ranking Freemasons were a part). Masons who pushed back against the stranglehold that Mussolini had placed upon them became direct targets.

Soon, Il Duce had all of the major Masonic lodges in Italy shut down. In 1925 Mussolini famously remarked in an interview that Italian Freemasonry was a political organization that was subservient to the Grand Orient de France—the same massive Masonic lodge allegedly behind the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Mussolini apparently believed that no Freemason in Italy could possibly be loyal to him, since they all took orders from this French lodge.

Shortly after giving this interview, Mussolini ordered the complete destruction of all Italian institutions remotely associated with the Masons. The brutal dictator declared, "Masonry must be destroyed and Freemasons should have no right to citizenship in Italy. To reach this end all means are good, from the club to the gun, from the breaking of windows to the purifying fire—the Freemasons must be ostracized—their very life must be made impossible."

The only one to stand up against this onslaught was Grand Master Domizo Torrigiani of the Grande Oriente d'Italia—the lodge that had been the center of Italian Freemasonry. After having his lodge forcibly shutdown, Grand Master Torrigiani challenged Mussolini by demanding that democratic principles be respected. Mussolini responded by having Torrigiani exiled to the remote Mediterranean island of Lipari, where he would die in obscurity.

All of this was certainly a slap in the face to the black-shirted Freemasons who had helped dear old Benito gain power in the first place. Shortly after ousting Torrigiani, Mussolini began to target lesser-known Freemasons and their associates. His fascist thugs forced their way into homes, ransacking the residences, terrorizing those unlucky enough to be found inside, and arresting and killing many in the process. The victims of this latest wave of persecution included another Grand Master, Raol Palermo, who was detained and eventually executed.

But perhaps the most famous Freemason that Benito Mussolini targeted was none other than Aleister Crowley. I know some may raise their eyebrows to see the dark British mage Aleister Crowley being labeled a Freemason, but

in truth, there probably wasn't a secret society that Crowley *wasn't* a part of. If it was secret, mysterious and set apart from mainstream society, Aleister Crowley was sure to be a card-carrying member. And the Freemasons were no exception. In fact, if you study Crowley's teachings, the symbolism he employed, and even his dress, you can tell that much of what he used was either directly or indirectly borrowed from Freemasonry. Even though officials of Freemasonry endlessly deny that Crowley ever had any access to their lodges, the influence is very obvious. Crowley himself claimed to have been initiated by a man named Don Jesus Medina during a visit to a lodge in Mexico City. (It is perhaps rather ironic that Crowley, the man known as the "Wickedest Man in the World", claimed to have joined the Freemasons under the auspices of a man carrying the name of Jesus.)

Whatever the case may be, Mussolini for one—after barring all Freemasons from Italian society—wasn't going to take any chances with Mr. Crowley. So, shortly after declaring Crowley to be much more wicked than he was, Mussolini had him driven out of his Abbey of Thelema—the occultist sanctuary he had built for himself on the island of Sicily. Crowley then disappeared from the Masonic milieu, but future Freemasons have been haunted by his presence ever since.

It is important to reiterate that modern-day Freemasons vehemently deny that Crowley was ever a member. And they do so for good reason. In the official Freemason charter, a good reputation and good moral character are prerequisites for membership. Someone like Crowley, who was known for conducting ritual orgies and sacrificing cats (and perhaps even people), could hardly be deemed an upstanding citizen by anyone's standard. But the fact that Crowley so frequently ripped off and coopted the secret rituals and symbols of Freemasonry for his own nefarious purposes is a clear indication that he was at least present at more than a few lodge meetings.

Freemasons, Fascism, and Communism

The aim of this book is to provide a fairly straightforward, chronological history of Freemasonry and the world events that it has allegedly been a part of and/or been shaped by. For this reason, we've expressly avoided bobbing and weaving from one date to another. We want to give you as clear of a timeline as possible, without any unnecessary complications.

Having said that, even though this chapter does pick up chronologically where the previous one left off—in the early 1920s—a little background is necessary. The rise of fascism and communism after World War One had some very complicated repercussions for the world at large and the world of Freemasonry in particular, and this requires a little bit of digging further into the past to understand just how these things came to be. But for the sake of chronological continuity, we will keep it brief.

First of all, the idea of communism as we know it originated in the mind of the 19th century writer and philosopher Karl Marx. Marx was not himself a Freemason (although it has been alleged that he had connections to the lodge in England, where he lived out most of his life). However, many of his followers were Masons, and the communist ideology he espoused would cross paths with Freemasonry quite a few times in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The biggest communist revolution occurred in Russia in 1917. The level of Masonic involvement in the Russian Revolution has long been debated. It is true that Freemasonry was rather widespread in Russian civic life in the early 20th century. The Freemasons were an intellectual bastion in Imperial Russia. Their lodges were places where otherwise oppressed Russians could openly voice their criticism of the Russian government.

It is interesting to note that the stated charter of Freemasonry today dictates that politics is not an allowable topic of discourse at Masonic meetings. This outward ban on speaking up on anything political was most likely put in to allay governments' fears about these secret gatherings. But if you believe the words of Alexander Kerensky, the man who led the initial revolution and briefly presided over a new Russian federal government before the communist takeover, the Freemasons were open agitators against the crown.

The Masons were allegedly fomenting revolution by encouraging peasants to go on strike for "bread and land". Others have made the claim that Kerensky himself was a Freemason, and allegedly even a Grand Master at a Russian lodge in 1916. But if conspiracy theorists wish to implicate Russian communists as Freemasons, it would stand to reason that Grand Master Kerensky would have stayed in power. Obviously, this was not the case; Kerensky and the provisional government he headed were quite literally run out of town when the Bolsheviks took over the apparatus of the state.

Nevertheless, the idea that leading communists were Freemasons would continue to be bandied about in the following years. A few hundred miles to the east, in Austria, a young artist and military veteran named Adolf Hitler

spent much of the 1920s virulently stating this case. He usually claimed that the communists were all part of either a Masonic or Jewish international cabal; when he felt the urge, he would claim it was a combination of both.

In his 1925 book *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*), Hitler devoted whole chapters to the disparagement of Freemasonry. He accused Masons—with the help of the Jews, of course—of attempting to take over all aspects of German society and conniving to steer the nation into the eager hands of the communists. Once Hitler came to power, he made it official; the Nazi party's handbook states that "The natural hostility of the peasant against the Jews, and his hostility against the Freemason as a servant of the Jew, must be worked up to a frenzy."

Hitler's diabolical ranting and ravings have of course been discredited, and no evidence has been found that the Freemasons were ever part of any sinister collectivist plot. Nevertheless, when Hitler was elected as Reich Chancellor in January of 1933, the Nazis rapidly went forward with their plans to shut down the Freemasons. The push to move the Freemasons out of Nazi Germany began with a stern warning given to the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Germany on April 7, 1933, by Hitler's number-one loyal stooge Hermann Goering.

Despite the inhospitable nature of his errand, it is said that Goering was at least polite enough to say "please" when he asked the Grand Master to leave. The Nazis' manners didn't last for long, however, and soon they were rooting out whatever Freemasons remained by absolute brute force. Freemasonry itself was officially banned in 1934, making anyone who wore the Masonic apron automatically an enemy of the state. All throughout World War Two, the authorities in Nazi Germany systematically persecuted any Freemasons unlucky enough to be found inside the territory of the Third Reich. Tragically, many who could not escape ended up as fodder for the concentration camps.

It is estimated that as many as 100,000 Freemasons were killed in the Holocaust. Many of them ended up in the horrific facility known as Buchenwald, where they were at the mercy of the so-called Hangman of

Buchenwald—Martin Sommer. This depraved Nazi was rather fond of hanging Freemasons (along with other inmates) up in the trees of the nearby woods, and due to the cries of the dying men dangling from them, the locals dubbed the grove the "Singing Forest of Buchenwald". Here the destroyed bodies of Freemasons, along with Jews, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Gypsies, communists, and anyone else the Nazis deemed a threat to the state were hung from the branches.

But the saddest sight for many inmates was the tree that the famed German poet Goethe was said to have sat under during his heyday in the 1700s. This tree, which had been preserved and revered long before the Nazis decided to build a hellish detention center nearby, came to represent a twisted mockery of Germany's more enlightened past. It was high literature and art in the face of the dreadfully degraded reality of the concentration camps. Strangely, the Nazis had actually chosen Goethe as their anti-Freemasonry poster child, saying that this hero of German culture had been against the Masons. Even for the Nazi high command, this was an extremely bizarre thing to do, since Goethe had actually been a Freemason himself!

Along with the oppression dished out by the Axis powers under Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler, Freemasons had yet another totalitarian fascist dictator to fear in the form of General Francisco Franco of Spain. Franco seized power in 1936, sparking the Spanish Civil War. The claim that he was freeing Spain from communism and Freemasonry was literally part of this man's war cry, and any Freemason taken prisoner by the fascists was immediately executed.

But Franco was not satisfied with merely eliminating Masonic POWs, and he eventually decided to become even more proactive in his persecution of Freemasonry. In March of 1940, he set up his own modern-day version of the Spanish inquisition, the Tribunal for the Suppression of Masonry. Accompanying legislation not only made it a criminal offense to be a Freemason but also made it possible to punish a Mason's relatives. Franco's fascist regime was now able to rip entire families apart simply for their ties to Freemasonry.

Even Franco had to make exceptions in his brutality from time to time, however, as was the case when a couple of his own generals were found to be Freemasons. Although these men were forced to renounce their Masonic membership, they were ultimately spared punishment because Franco needed them on the field of battle during the ongoing Civil War. In the end, Franco won that war, and just as importantly he managed to keep his country out of the larger conflict of World War Two. Unlike its fascist counterparts of Germany, Italy, and Japan, Franco's Spain was able to survive the conflagration intact, and when the smoke cleared he found himself to be the last fascist standing.

His hatred of Freemasons survived the war as well. Shortly after the Allied victory, Franco began to pen a series of anti-Masonic articles under the pseudonym of J. Boor. These articles were eventually compiled into an anthology called *Masoneria* which was published on May 3, 1951. In this book, Franco blamed the Freemasons for destroying the Spanish Empire of old—and for just about every other problem or crisis the country had ever experienced. Freemasonry remained officially anathematized in Spain until Franco's death in 1975, when King Juan Carlos succeeded him and rolled back the ban.

Freemasons, fascism, and communism have had a long and complicated history, and Freemasons have been scapegoated for just about every societal ill you could ever imagine. Fascist totalitarian dictators lashed out with fear against what they could not control and tried to shut down the free spirit of the Freemason for good. But the resilient spirit of Masonry could not be chained down, locked up, or denied.

Freemasonry of 1950s America

The 1950s was in many ways America's heyday of unprecedented growth. After the victorious war, the American economy was booming. And even as the former superpower of the British Empire was falling apart, the US had risen to the top as the military hegemon of the world. It was also during the 1950s that American Freemasonry reached its zenith, with the majority of the world's Masons belonging to a lodge within the United States.

For many Americans today, the 50s symbolize the good old days, but in reality, those good old days were fraught with all kinds of difficulty. For one thing, the Cold War threat of nuclear annihilation was never far from anyone's mind. The Atomic Age had begun when the United States dropped

the first nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan—on the orders of the Freemason President, Harry Truman.

The atomic bombing of Japan has always been highly controversial for a variety of reasons. Number one, the idea of detonating a nuclear bomb over a city full of civilians now strikes most people as overkill, to say the least; and number two, evidence has since surfaced that seems to clearly indicate that Japan was on the path to surrender before the bombs were dropped. The question, then, is why did Truman do it?

Some conspiracy theories paint a picture of a US president influenced by a diabolical branch of Freemasonry hell-bent on making an example to the world of the power wielded by the coming New World Order. Now, the "New World Order" has been bandied about in conspiratorial circles for quite some time, but just what does it mean? Is this something that some blogger somewhere simply made up? Well, if you would like some sort of tangible proof, just pull a dollar out of your billfold and flip it over to the backside. Now look under the pyramid. You will see the phrase "Novus Ordo Seclorum". What does that mean? It's Latin for "New World Order".

Just how it got there, and what it means, has been debated for decades—ever since 1935, when fellow Freemason FDR commissioned the design for the bill. One theory is that the pyramid, which is unfinished and sports an all-seeing Masonic eye, is an allegory for the Masons' unfinished business of creating a world government.

It wasn't long after the end of World War Two that nuclear weapons technology spread to the Soviet Union, creating a nuclear standoff dangerous enough to threaten the entire planet. Were Freemasons behind this unexpectedly rapid nuclear proliferation? There are some who would say they were. There are KGB reports that spies for the Soviet Union were indeed seeking membership in Masonic lodges in the United States.

The most famous of these alleged spies were Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were convicted of handing America's nuclear secrets over to the Russians in 1951. The Rosenbergs had also managed to seriously endanger

the lives of hundreds of thousands of US troops in the Korean War through the release of sensitive data on the capabilities of the US Air Force. This gave the Soviets near air supremacy throughout much of this engagement.

But not all 50s Freemasons were in cahoots with the communists. And one Freemason who particularly wanted to prevent the expansion of communism was General Douglas MacArthur. MacArthur initially led UN forces in the war that broke out on the Korean peninsula in 1950. Following the amphibious invasion of Inchon, he managed to push the communist Korean fighters all the way back to the Chinese border. He then intended to take the fight to China itself, even advocating the use of nuclear weapons to effect the complete decimation of the People's Republic. Harry Truman ultimately overruled MacArthur, ordering him to stand down and removing him from leadership due to his defiant stance.

Nevertheless, MacArthur remained legendary in Japan, where after World War Two he had served as the supreme allied commander and built the new Japanese governing structure from scratch. He had also made sure that a few Masonic temples were built as well. As early as 1947, he had the fledgling provisional government of Japan open the door for Japanese citizens to start and join their own Masonic lodges. These included a new lodge at Yokosuka Naval Base, as well as three separate lodges that were established in Tokyo.

Even while MacArthur was building up his legacy in Japan, a senator named Joseph McCarthy was building up his infamy back home in America. He was officially hunting for communists, but Freemasons were on his radar as well—so much so that many felt the need to create splinter groups and factions outside of mainstream Freemasonry in order to keep McCarthyism from getting inside the lodge.

One such group was initiated by the exiled Polish politician and Freemason Jozef Retinger. The group first met at the Bilderberg Hotel on May 29, 1954. It was from the name of this initial meeting site that this secret cabal came to be known as the Bilderberg Group or more simply as the Bilderbergers.

Among other things, the group had a stated objective early on for pushing towards a European Union. The EU was still very much on the drawing board in the early 1950s, but the Bilderbergers would push on until their dream became a reality. In fact, the first direct precursor to the European Union, the European Community, was conceived by the Bilderbergers and made reality with the Treaty of Rome—that old capital of European Empire—in 1955.

For many conspiracy theorists, the creation of a united European super state is just the first stepping stone to creating a world government. Proponents of this theory vigorously claim that groups like the Freemasons and the Bilderbergers are actively taking part in the process after having made major inroads in the 1950s.

According to some, the plotting and scheming behind the scenes was not all political. Some of it was cultural. There have been claims that Bilderberg-backed Freemasonry became heavily involved with the music scene of the 1950s, sponsoring acts such as Elvis Presley in order to influence the culture of the nation. This is all just conjecture, of course, and has not been proven one way or the other. But as you can see, the happy, idyllic 50s were not all about *Leave it to Beaver* and Ovaltine; there were some people with nothing short of world domination on their minds.

Freemasonry and the Killing of Kennedys

The election of John F. Kennedy was an exciting time for many Americans. It seemed to be a time of great hope and optimism in which, as Kennedy himself described it, “the torch had been passed to a new generation of Americans”. But it is alleged that there were many “powers that be” behind the scenes that did not much appreciate the fact that this torch had been passed at all. Those who wanted to maintain the status quo saw the dashing young President as a great threat to their hegemony.

Contrary to many of his associates (who just so happened to be high-ranking Freemasons), Kennedy wanted to deescalate the crisis that was developing in Vietnam. He was considering a removal of US troops by 1965. Obviously, this is not what occurred, and after Kennedy’s death in 1963, the US became increasingly locked into the Vietnamese struggle. But while it is certainly true that Kennedy’s foreign policy ran afoul of many

powerful people in Washington, DC, is there any evidence that his death was part of a Masonic plot?

Admittedly, the links that conspiracy theorists point to are tenuous at best. First of all, they highlight the coincidences surrounding the place and time that Kennedy was killed. He was gunned down on November 22, 1963, as his motorcade traveled through Dealey Plaza in Dallas. The so-called circumstantial evidence linking this event to the Masons begins with the fact that Dealey Plaza was named for a Freemason called George Bannerman Dealey. The plaza was also home to a giant Masonic obelisk that stood directly over the site of Kennedy's murder. Just a coincidence for most, but some see more. And if you're up for another stretch of the imagination, it has also been pointed out that as soon as Kennedy landed in Texas, he was greeted by a group of school children singing the song "The Eyes of Texas"—which just so happened to be written by a Freemason!

Most of us would find such insinuations from such minor details to be absurd, but there are many hardcore conspiracy theorists who maintain that there is indeed a connection between the assassination of John F. Kennedy and Freemasonry. According to these theorists, the gunman who was arrested for the crime—Lee Harvey Oswald—was just a stooge chosen to take the fall for the greatest assassination in history. As Oswald famously told the press immediately after the shooting, he "was just a patsy".

Oswald unfortunately never had the chance to elaborate on this statement, because soon thereafter he too was gunned down—killed by nightclub owner and petty mobster Jack Ruby. Ruby stated at the time that his reason for marching into a police station (he just happened to know exactly where Oswald was being held) and shooting Oswald before he could stand trial was simply that he was consumed by anger and indignation at the man who had killed the president.

This petty crook and racketeering gangster, it turns out, was a very patriotic man; according to Ruby, he simply wished to avenge John F. Kennedy. But those who knew Ruby best found such assertions entirely laughable. District Attorney Jim Garrison, who investigated the case, summed up the

absurdity of Ruby's claims of being caught up in a patriotic passion when he stated, "Jack Ruby had no strong political views of his own. He was just a hoodlum out for a buck."

Whoever was responsible for Kennedy's death, he was succeeded by a powerful Freemason named Lyndon Baines Johnson. It interesting to note that while Johnson claimed he was going to continue Kennedy's policies, when it came to Vietnam he ordered an immediate change of course. Just a few days after Kennedy's death, Johnson rattled off a memo to one of the top generals handling the situation in Southeast Asia, General Maxwell Taylor, telling him, "The more I look at it, the more it is clear to me that South Vietnam is our most important military area right now."

Shortly after this directive was issued, the still-controversial Gulf of Tonkin incident occurred. The American version is that US naval vessels engaged in sea battles with North Vietnamese ships. The Vietnamese have always maintained that the attack never occurred—the whole thing was made up merely as a pretense for war. If this is the case, it would certainly fit into the Freemasonry narrative of "order from chaos". This is a belief that the best way to achieve an objective is to first create a problem (such as imaginary boat attacks), then find a solution (war in Vietnam), so you can get what you really wanted in the first place (US domination of Southeast Asia). According to some theorists, this is Freemasonry 101.

Whatever the truth may be, right at the same time America was getting dragged into a horrible quagmire in Vietnam, the Masons of England were celebrating a major milestone. 1967 was the 250th anniversary of the founding of the first grand lodge in 1717. A rally to commemorate the event was held in the Albert Hall lodge in London. Over 6,500 Masons from all over the world attended this gathering. A quarter of a millennium later, the place where it all began was still going strong.

In the States, meanwhile, the Kennedy conspiracy was getting even thicker after Jack Ruby passed away in prison. The world was shocked when a Dallas Deputy Sheriff named Al Maddox revealed that Jack Ruby had confided in him his belief that he had been injected with "cancer cells"

shortly before his death. Maddox claimed that Ruby told him, “They injected me for a cold—but it was cancer cells”. Ruby apparently believed that he had been tricked into taking a vaccination shot that contained some sort of carcinogenic contagion. At the time, Deputy Maddox had just thought that Ruby was being paranoid—but when he died just a few weeks later from an extremely aggressive, fast-growing cancer, he began to believe Ruby had been telling the truth.

But that wasn’t all—Maddox also claimed that shortly before Ruby died, he had handed him a small scrap of paper on which was scrawled the message, “It’s a conspiracy! If you keep your eyes open and your mouth shut, you’re going to learn a lot!” Now, if Ruby really did deliver this cryptic note shortly before expiring, it’s almost certain he wasn’t speaking of a conspiracy over the chicken nuggets in the prison cafeteria. If Ruby really wrote these words, he was clearly indicating that the Kennedy assassination and his involvement in shooting the alleged assassin were part of a vast conspiracy.

And many conspiracy theorists believe that it wasn’t enough to kill John F. Kennedy, his assassin, and his assassin’s assassin. It was also necessary to kill his brother with a mind-controlled robot named Sirhan Sirhan. The man who bore this double-barreled appellation was a 24-year-old Palestinian national who seemingly just happened to wander into the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles where Robert Kennedy was giving a victory speech following the California primary during the 1968 election. After his big win, RFK seemed poised to get the Democratic nomination when Sirhan stumbled upon the scene and shot him dead.

The gunman was tackled and taken to the ground immediately after delivering those lethal shots—and then it was as if he had just woken up out of a dream. Alarmed at what was happening around him, the bewildered Sirhan claimed to have no knowledge of what had just transpired. It was as if he had been sleepwalking when he pulled the trigger. How can we account for such a thing?

Well, if you believe some conspiracy theorists, the explanation is obvious: Sirhan was programmed by a dark Masonic cabal. According to Sirhan's own memory—or what is left of it—he was merely in the area looking for a party to go to. The 24-year-old was apparently ready to have a night out on the town when he stumbled upon the Ambassador hotel where Kennedy was speaking. He hit the bar and had a few drinks. Sirhan claims that after he left the bar, he realized that he was too intoxicated to drive, so he went down to the hotel pantry to get himself some coffee so he could sober up.

Here he claims that he met a pleasant young woman who began to chat with him. They made random small talk as the nice lady helped Sirhan fix his coffee. But after taking one sip of that coffee, the next thing Sirhan knew he was being tackled to the ground and accused of killing Robert F. Kennedy, who was bleeding to death just a few feet away. To this very day, Sirhan Sirhan claims to have no knowledge of what happened between that first sip of coffee and the aftermath of the shooting. Was Sirhan drugged? Or, as many conspiracy theorists and anti-Masonic activists claim, was he somehow programmed and placed in a hypnotic trance so he would carry out the shooting? What happened between him, the nice lady in the pantry and that cup of coffee? Some say she was a CIA agent working in tandem with Freemasons.

As strange as this tale has become, it gets even stranger with the uncovering of a Russian KGB memo that seems to implicate President Johnson himself in the assassinations of both Kennedys! It is hard to believe that an American vice president would collude with others to have his president killed so he could step up to take his place, but this is exactly what the most extreme of the conspiracy theories hold. And since Johnson was a high-ranking—yep, you guessed it—Freemason at the time, he had plenty of connections to help the plot go forward without a hitch.

So, who really did kill the Kennedys? Have you ever heard the expression "a picture is worth a thousand words?" Because you can discuss the inner workings of conspiracy all day long, but this one photo of then vice-president Lyndon B. Johnson exchanging a curious wink with Congressman Albert Thomas seems to tell it all. Everyone else in the picture is grieving

the loss of John F. Kennedy, yet Representative Thomas, LBJ, and even his wife Lady Bird somehow seem to be quietly congratulating themselves. Congratulating themselves on what?

This photo was taken immediately after LBJ was sworn in, and it was initially excluded from the records—most likely due to the unseemly effect created by the winking LBJ and smirking Lady Bird. For several decades, only the photo shown at the beginning of this chapter was known to the general public. When this image was finally uncovered, it created a firestorm of speculation.

So what really happened? Who was really behind the killing of the Kennedys? If anyone knows for sure, they must have taken an oath of secrecy—because they sure aren't talking.

Freemasonry and Organized Crime

Any Freemason will tell you that the order refuses to have anything at all to do with criminals. In fact, one of the main stipulations for membership is to have good moral character—meaning no criminal record. Yet there are a few tales of Freemasonry brushing up against the dark underbelly of organized crime. And nowhere has this been more the case than in the Masonic lodges of Italy. It seems that dealings between the organized crime syndicate known as the Sicilian Mafia and Italian Freemasonry can be traced back to the oppressive dictatorship of that anti-Masonic fascist Benito Mussolini.

Mussolini tried his best to root out and round up Freemasons and Mafia members alike during the 1920s and 1930s. Il Duce despised any organization that he couldn't control, and both Freemasons and the Mafia fit that bill. However, his oppression had the unintended side effect of driving the Freemasons and the Mafia together. The old adage "we must all hang together, or we shall all hang separately" was never more apt than during the reign of Mussolini. Realizing that they would both sink if they didn't render aid to each other whenever possible, the two persecuted groups began a vigorous collaboration against the Italian government. In all irony, in targeting the Mafia and Freemasonry for extermination, Mussolini simply made both groups stronger as they created a tight network of opposition against his best (worst) efforts—so tight, that even long after Mussolini was dead and gone, these bonds would remain.

The centerpiece for much of the discourse between Italian Freemasonry and the Mafia was the so-called P2 Lodge, which operated under the jurisdiction of the Grande Oriente d'Italia. This lodge was in official use from 1945 to 1976, but by the late 1970s its charter had been withdrawn. Why was the charter withdrawn? Well, apparently, after a man named Licio Gelli was appointed Grand Master, it was found that he had ties with Italian fascists. The fact that a group of Freemasons would appoint a fascist to lead them after fascism had nearly destroyed them decades before is full of incredible irony, but this is apparently what happened.

When the governing apparatus of the Grande Oriente discovered Gelli's background they were appalled enough to disavow the lodge and cut ties with them. This didn't stop Gelli, however, and even without support from Freemasonry's centralized bureaucracy, he continued to run the P2 Lodge as an unofficial, yet fully functional satellite of the mainstream Masons.

For the rest of the 1970s, Gelli was busy bending the lodge to his own will. He built close ties with local politicians, wealthy bankers, and members of the Catholic clergy, as well as news media and publishing companies. One of the most important figures from this influential cabal that Gelli cobbled together was Michel Sindona, a top financier for the Vatican. It was through

Sindona that a powerful banker by the name of Roberto Calvi made the acquaintance of Gelli and the P2 Lodge in 1977.

Known as “God’s banker”, Roberto Calvi was the President of the Banco Ambrosiano in Milan. Banco Ambrosiano was a top shareholder of the papal bank. After joining forces with the P2 Lodge, Calvi began to establish a string of foreign shell companies on its behalf, including ten located in South America alone. These offshore companies were notorious for their money laundering and other decidedly unethical transactions. The papal bank directly contributed to this money laundering scheme by helping to fund Banco Ambrosiano.

But soon enough Italian banking authorities began to zero in on the operation. Calvi knew that his days as a free man were numbered—but did he also know that his days of being alive were drawing to an end as well? Before the police could even swoop in to arrest him, in the summer of 1981 Calvi was found dead, hanging from Blackfriars Bridge, a famous landmark in far-off London.

From the outset, the scene of the supposed suicide seemed oddly staged. Calvi hung from the bridge by a bright orange rope wrapped tightly around his throat. Lodged deep in his pockets, he had wads of cash amounting to over 10,000 dollars—and a couple of bricks. As well as the obscure symbolism of bricks in Masonry, it would later be discovered that the orange rope was none other than the “cable tow” used in Masonic rituals. (It is a standard Masonic initiation rite to tie this cord around the initiate’s neck.)

While many would assume that this was a clear message that death lurks for those Masons who decide to leave the lodge, Freemasons themselves protest that this cord has nothing at all to do with death. Although it may look like a hangman’s noose around the initiate’s neck, it is actually meant to symbolize the fraternal cord that connects all Freemasons together. Even if there is an innocent explanation for the orange rope, though, the fact that Calvi was hung from Blackfriars Bridge, a well-known Masonic landmark, made the matter suspicious in some minds.

Of course, even if Calvi was murdered, it wasn't necessarily by the Masons. Some suspect that the Mafia was the real culprit in the killing and sought to frame the Masons by using Masonic paraphernalia and a Masonic backdrop. But there was no proof either way, and the case was eventually shelved as one of the 20th century's more bizarre mysteries. Then, in 1991, Roberto Calvi's son Carlo reopened the investigation by hiring a private investigator named Jeff Katz to look into his father's death.

Katz and a team of 30 other investigators spent much of the 1990s doggedly searching for answers. They managed to trace a trail to several notorious underworld figures in the process, and apparently they struck a nerve. Because it wasn't long into the investigation that one of the detectives, Luca Tescaroli, was sent a mysterious package containing black powder, two 12-volt batteries, and a message on a scrap of paper that warned, "This is an ultimatum. Stop."

It was obvious that someone, somewhere, did not want the investigation to continue—but it did. The investigators uncovered an intriguing clue when they came upon British police records of the murder of a petty thug named Sergio Vaccari just days after Calvi had turned up dead. At the time, police had had little reason to believe that these murders were connected. The Rosetta stone proved to be the Masonic papers that Sergio Vaccari was carrying.

A fellow Italian Freemason with many of the same underworld ties as Calvi dying in London at the same exact time—it seemed to be a coincidence worth following. Picking up on this lead, investigators found that Vaccari had recently been kicked out of the apartment he was renting. Just before giving him the boot, his landlord had offered him another unit. In fact, he had apparently given Vaccari two choices, and a seemingly satisfied Vaccari had picked the one he preferred.

After getting settled in, however, Vaccari had requested information about the other option that the landlord had available. That option just so happened to be an apartment in a building called Chelsea Cloisters—which

is where Roberto Calvi was staying prior to his sudden death. Once this revelation came to light, the Katz team was able to find several more all-too-coincidental links between Roberto Calvi and Sergio Vaccari.

Was fellow Freemason Vaccari somehow behind the murder of Calvi? And was Vaccari in turn murdered to keep him from talking? Anyone who understood how the Sicilian Mafia worked knew that a two-bit thug like Vaccari wouldn't be able to operate without marching orders from mob boss Francesco Di Carlo. But when Di Carlo was finally made to answer the questions of these intrepid investigators, he did not supply them with a confession. Instead, he cryptically responded, "I was not the one who hanged Calvi. One day I may write the full story, but the real killers will never be brought to justice because they are being protected by the Italian state, [and] by members of the P2 Masonic Lodge."

And sure enough, when five suspects were put on trial in 2005 for their alleged connection to Calvi's death, they were all acquitted. It seemed that they had bucked the system and skated free due to their beneficial connections. This, of course, only seemed to verify what the old mob boss Francesco Di Carlo had said about the state and Freemasonry lending their protection to Calvi's murderers. Could it be true? Are Freemasons somehow above the law?

Well, the idea of Masonic immunity to justice was literally put on trial in 2004, not in Italy, but at a lodge in New York. Here the Masons were once again in the headlines for all the wrong reasons, due to a standard initiation ceremony that ended in the death of the initiate.

Freemasonry's rituals involve much dramatic playacting, such as blindfolding members, putting ropes around their necks, and—as was the case in this tragedy—putting guns to their heads. In this particular ceremony, the goal was to induce a state of fear and obedience in the new Mason. But despite the high anxiety, no one was supposed to get hurt. Naturally, an unloaded gun is supposed to be used in such a ceremony, but on this occasion the gun was fully loaded. It went off and struck the initiate,

a 47-year-old man named William James, right in the face. James was dealt a mortal wound and died almost immediately after being shot.

The Mason conducting the ceremony, Albert Eid, apparently had two guns on him that day, one that was loaded and one that was not loaded, and according to his testimony, he simply chose the wrong gun. From the outset this seems to be a tragic accident, but there are of course those who claim that the death of William James was not so accidental after all. And not all of them are professional conspiracy theorists.

In this case, there are conflicting stories from among the Masons themselves. You would think that a clandestine brotherhood worth the name would look out for a wayward member, but when it came to Albert Eid, the Masons couldn't seem to be bothered. Immediately after the shooting, Carl Fitje, the Grand Master of New York State, went on the record to proclaim that Freemasons do not use guns in any of their ceremonies. So, what happened? Was Eid's lodge going rogue and making up their own unofficial initiation ceremonies?

Eid was charged with second degree manslaughter, to which he initially pled not guilty. He explained that the initiation ceremony was supposed to have him shoot blanks as the new initiate, James, sat blindfolded in a chair while another Mason struck cans with a stick. This was supposed to scare James into thinking he had been shot. Unfortunately, the blindfolded man really was shot, and he perished so rapidly thereafter that fear wasn't even a part of the equation.

Eventually, Eid cut a deal and pled guilty to criminally negligent homicide, receiving a sentence of five years' probation. It was an extremely light sentence for such a charge—so light, in fact, that it has engendered speculation that Eid's ties to Freemasonry helped him get off easy. Perhaps we will never know.

Freemasonry in the Age of Terror

Of course, conspiracy theories about the Masons (or anything else, for that matter) wouldn't be complete if we did not—in one way, shape, or form—bring up the events of 9/11. Innumerable theories have been launched in regard to that tragic day in the late summer of 2001. They range from secret government cabals, to astrology and numerology, and to all manner of other so-called "secret sources of knowledge".

But clamoring the loudest among these conspiracy theories is the idea that 9/11 was the effort of behind-the-scenes plotters from a secret society such as the Illuminati or the Freemasons who sought to use their age-old model for change: order out of chaos. As mentioned previously in this book, it had long been a theme of Freemasonry to create order from chaos. The idea is

that you create a problem, then offer a solution, and thereby generate the change you wanted.

In the case of 9/11, the theory states that the attacks were carried out to create a problem which would be solved by the invasion of the Middle East, which would bring the plotters what they wanted—control of Middle Eastern oil. It's a fairly basic formula, and some may find it outright absurd (if not insulting) in the context of 9/11, but there are many who subscribe to just this theory. In fact, the current President of the United States, Donald Trump, is one of the leading proponents of the idea.

Thanks to his previous life as a civilian building contractor, Trump considers himself an expert on architecture, and he has long insisted that the two planes that hit the World Trade Center should not have been able to take down the twin towers. According to Trump, the Trade Center was one of the first buildings to have been "built from the outside" with a network of reinforced steel supports on the exterior of the structure. As President Trump describes it, "Most buildings are built with steel on the inside, around the elevator shafts. This one was built from the outside, which is the strongest structure you can have."

Yet Mr. Trump maintains, "it was almost like a can of soup" the way the hijacked planes easily sliced through the buildings. So how, then, does Trump (and others) explain the destruction of the World Trade Center? Many contend that since the impact of the planes wouldn't have been enough, bombs must also have been detonated to take down the buildings. While—to be clear—there is absolutely no proof of this, this 9/11 theory remains very popular to this day.

Some have even asserted that it was a plot by Freemasons in tandem with elements of the government that strategically placed tactical nuclear weapons in the buildings to bring them down. Was this another case of Masonic "Ordo Ab Chao"—"Order out of Chaos"?

Well, before we even look down that rabbit hole, let's consider that this conspiracy theory does not take into account all of the brave men and

women who lost their lives on that September day—and who just so happened to be Freemasons. Yes, many of the firefighters, police and other emergency personnel belonged to the Masonic order. But despite their self-sacrificing support during America's darkest hour, it remains difficult for Freemasonry to shake the specter of these conspiracy theories.

Ironically enough, these same theories were eventually picked up by the Islamic terrorists for their own use. This propaganda methodology was on full display during the ISIS takeover of Iraq in 2013. In the United States, President Barack Obama had just won reelection when the chaos of ISIS began to disrupt the Middle East. The emboldened terrorists were tearing through Syria and Iraq virtually unchecked, and they soon began to launch personal attacks against President Obama himself in which they accused him of conspiring with Freemasons.

An ISIS spokesperson at the time issued the following statement:

The slaves of secularism and agents of the Freemasons appealed to their Crusader master, the Black of Washington, to save them from assaults of the Knights of Khilafah, who have become very close to conquering their capital, and eradicating their malice from the land of Muslim Kurdistan. So, the dog of the Romans [Obama] thrusted his Air Force into a new dilemma; and entered into a military pact with the agents of yesterday, the Kurds, to commit the same stupidity that he had not awakened to, even until now! And it seems that this submissive fool forgot or pretended to forget the quagmire of Iraq years ago, in which tens of thousands of crusaders were annihilated and tens of thousands of them were injured with permanent disabilities, not to mention the material losses and financial crises that nearly wiped the United States off the map!

As you can see, the conspiracy theories that have been expounded upon so much in the West have made their way all the way to the battlefields of the Middle East. Right alongside their racist remarks about Obama being the "Black of Washington", these Islamic extremists clearly labeled any American intervention against them as being nothing short of another Crusade—and linked it explicitly to Freemasonry.

The irony of this whole situation is about as rich as it could get. Just before ISIS called Obama a "Crusader master", the president had been attempting to downplay their atrocities by making erroneous moral equivalencies between the Crusades of 1099 AD and the bloodthirsty murder, rapine, and destruction of ISIS. After these oddly apologist remarks on the terror group's actions, Obama was then ridiculed by the very extremists he had attempted to downplay! But whatever names and labels the Muslim mafia known as ISIS wishes to hurl at Barack Obama, as far as anyone can tell, President Obama has never been a Freemason.

However, his Secretary of Defense, John Kerry, most certainly was. And it is interesting to note that just as the war in Iraq and Syria really began to heat up, John Kerry went on the record to state, "We will make order out of chaos." As we have seen throughout this book, this is one of Freemasonry's best-known slogans. It is the strategy that they have preached to be the most effective means to effect change in the world. Coincidence, maybe—but Kerry and Obama's foreign policy during the Obama administration's second term did indeed seem poised to dismantle the Middle East.

We will have to go deep into conspiracy-theory land for some of this stuff—but it goes a little something like this: Do you remember back in the 2016 presidential campaign when Donald Trump shocked the world with the seemingly absurd statement that "Obama founded ISIS?" To most (including yours truly) this seemed completely ridiculous. But if you believe the conspiracy theory that deep state actors with ties to Freemasonry (such as John Kerry) are actively working to dismantle the Middle East, the perspective on Trump's seemingly absurd statement begins to shift.

Because here it is claimed that the American CIA, directed by President Obama, did indeed arm rebels to use as mercenaries in clandestine missions in the Middle East. This would certainly not be without precedent; the CIA has been doing such things for decades. Just think back to the Cuban exiles who were armed and organized by the Kennedy administration to overthrow Fidel Castro back in the early 1960s. Now flash forward to the 1980s, when

the Reagan administration used the CIA to arm Taliban fighters in Afghanistan after the invasion by Soviet Russia.

The CIA ended up utilizing a guerilla leader named Osama bin Laden. Yes, that's right—that Osama bin Laden. It's undeniable now that bin Laden was a CIA creation set in motion to fight off the Soviet Union. You can argue of course, that after bin Laden served his purpose in the Cold War he became a monster that got out of control. How could his CIA handlers have known that he would go rogue and create the terror group known as Al-Qaida? But whatever the outcome, bin Laden's operation was indeed at least initially funded by the CIA—and some say, by the Freemasons.

So, can the same exact thing be said for ISIS? Was it indeed an Obama-backed CIA/Freemason project that got out of control? Is that why Obama always downplays the mess that erupted under his watch? Because he and John Kerry and a hidden Freemasonry/CIA deep state cabal were the actual founders of the terror group? Is that why in his final presidential address, Obama famously referred to ISIS as simply being the "JV" team? Were they initially proxies of his and a whole cabal of Freemasons? This is just one of many conspiracy theories involving terrorism and Freemasonry.

The Freemasons of the Future

In recent years Freemasonry has attempted a kind of PR campaign in order to gain new members. Because the truth is, the Masons are dying off. The median age of current members is from 60 to 80 years old, and without a surge in new recruits, this means that there will be a sudden drop in membership in the near future. In fact, it is predicted that an estimated 100 lodges will be forced to shut down and every single year if this trend continues.

It is for this reason that current leadership is forced to look toward the future—today. There have been continual efforts to convince the millennial generation in particular that it's "cool" to be a Freemason. In their outreach to these younger potential members, social media campaigns have been initiated online and several new university lodges have been created on the ground—all in an effort to attract the youth.

Young people are becoming increasingly dependent on internet-based community connections, so in order to survive and remain financially viable, the Freemasons of the future will need to utilize communication technology to keep themselves relevant. It has also been determined that the future will have to be more open than the past. The days of dark meetings in windowless lodges are over, and now the Masons are attempting to be much more transparent.

As much of an oxymoron as it may seem at first glance, this secret society is now seeking more transparency! This has been deemed necessary in order to combat some of the more rampant rumors that have been circulating about the lodge. Masonic leadership feels that in order to get people to stop talking about the more extreme myths and legends of the craft, they need to get them talking about something else. They realize that the best way to kill the gossip is to confront it head on.

Now many lodges are doing away with many of their more mysterious traditions, rituals and rites of initiation in favor of more pancake dinners, card tournaments, and fish fries. The Freemasons are becoming more of a communal and charitable organization, and there are many who believe that their future lies in following the example of the Shriners.

The Shriners are an entirely charity-focused organization that is a direct offshoot of the Freemasons. Shriners successfully raise millions of dollars for several worthy causes every single year. They have even created their own “Shriners Hospitals” to take care of the sick. With all of the good will they have created, you would be hard pressed to find anyone launching any diabolical conspiracy theories against them. Shriners march in parades, wear funny hats, drive miniature cars, dress up as clowns, and help kids with cancer, and you are unlikely to find such charitable givers and helpers of the community lumped in with the Illuminati!

It is for this reason that many believe that Freemasonry as a whole needs to take this example and become much more community focused in order to survive in the future. In order to remain viable, keep up their membership,

and avoid some of the more conspiratorial tales they have been plagued with in the past, this secret society just might have to give up many of its secrets.

Freemasons—Are they Truly Free?

One of the most famous initiation rites for new Freemasons is for them to lift up their pant leg in order to demonstrate that they do not have any shackles attached to the leg on display. This is meant to show symbolically that the prospective initiate is not shackled or chained down to anything in this life and is a free agent able to make his own decisions. But how free are the Freemasons? Some detractors who have left the group would answer, not very.

These disgruntled former members allege that the Freemasons are nothing more than a cult. In particular, many Christians have left the group because they found that its rituals went against their faith. Certain symbolism, and perhaps the fact that certain higher-ups are meant to be addressed as "worshipful masters", has rubbed Christian believers the wrong way. This conflict has been with the Masons from the very beginning; it was the reason the Catholic Church banned the group long ago.

But ideological differences aside, could Freemasonry be said to be a cultish group controlling its members? Secrecy is a form of control, and no doubt the fact that Masons are expected to take and keep certain oaths could be viewed as a cult form of discipline. But having said that, several members have left the Masons and divulged secrets. Whole books have now been written exposing just about every supposed secret the Freemasons ever had. None of these former members have been killed.

So even if spooky rituals are conducted insinuating physical harm to those who leave the group, for the modern Mason at least, these seem to be nothing more than empty threats—used more to set the mood than anything else. In the case of William James, who lost his life during a Masonic ritual in 2004, there was certainly an aspect of intimidation in the initiation, but as the shooter Albert Eid explained, it was just a scare tactic and nothing more.

All the members were so horrified at what had happened that they quit to distance themselves from the lodge that conducted the fatal ceremony. If mainstream Masonry is this skittish about an accidental death, it would hardly seem likely that they would purposefully cause the deaths of those who choose to leave the craft. Nowadays the lodge has a revolving door, with members going in and out as they please. Freemasonry may be in decline, but at least its members are still free.

Further Readings

Now that we have brought this book to a close, let's take a look at the many resources that made it possible in the first place. Here you will find thoughts and theories from all sides of the aisle when it comes to the history, influence, and impact of Freemasonry. Feel free to look through them as much as you like.

***The Secret Societies Bible: The Definitive Guide to Mysterious Organizations*. Joel Levy**
This book is an exhaustive reference point for secret societies. They're all listed in alphabetical order, so not only will you find Freemasons under "F", you will also find chapters on the Knights Templar, the Rosicrucians, and the Chinese Triads. This gives you a better understanding of all secret societies and how they connect and intersect with Freemasonry. If you would like to have a bigger picture of how Freemasonry interacts with other shadowy groups, then you are going to need to read this book.

***The Freemasons in America: Inside the Secret Society*. H. Paul Jeffersons**
This book shines a spotlight on the influence of Freemasonry in America. There is perhaps no other place on the planet that has been influenced by Freemasonry as much as the United States of America. This book helps to highlight the connections that the very Founding Fathers of the US had with Freemasonry—and how this connection to the inner workings of the lodge has continued to this very day.

***Rule by Secrecy*. Jim Marrs**
The late great Jim Marrs was a kind of connoisseur of conspiracy, and in *Rule by Secrecy* he does not disappoint. He takes us down every possible conspiratorial path you could ever imagine when it comes to the Freemasons. From their founding shrouded in mystery to more modern scandals and events, Marrs covers it all.

***The Freemasons: A History of the World's Most Powerful Secret Society*. Jasper Ridley**
In this classic expose on Freemasonry, Ridley relays the rich and complex tapestry that Freemasons have woven throughout history. Ridley is an expert historian, so you can expect nothing but the best from his report on Freemasonry.

***A New Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*. Arthur Edward Wate**
This compendium of all things Freemasonry literally goes down the list, rattling off every important aspect of the craft. From facts, to symbols, to secret rites, this book is a convenient source of information.

***Freemasons for Dummies*. Christopher Hodapp**
This book is not like your typical book from the For Dummies series. Written by a Past Master, Knight Templar, and Freemason, this book covers all the information that is allowed to leave the lodge doors. You won't find much in the way of conspiracy theories and sensational stories here, but for a practical guide into the everyday mundane life of Freemasonry, this book has no equal.

***Born in Blood: The Lost Secrets of Freemasonry*. John J. Robinson**
In his discourse on Freemasonry, John Robinson takes us down the path of conspiracy and details what he alleges to be the "secret" side of Freemasonry that the general public knows nothing about. This book takes us through some of the most riveting tales to have come out of the Masonic lodge. You can learn a lot here about the sordid affair of the Vatican banker Alberto Calvi, who met his end when he crossed paths with members of the Sicilian Mafia working out of a Masonic lodge.

***The Hidden Life in Freemasonry*. C.W. Leadbeater**
Coming straight from the mouth of a Freemason himself, this book takes us through some of the twists and turns of Freemasonry from an insider's perspective. Here we can get some great insight into the craft's everyday routine. It isn't full of all the sensationalism of extreme conspiracy theory, but it's a solid guide to how the lodge actually operates. So if you would like to learn something concrete about the Freemasons and leave the wildest

conspiracy theories aside, this book is well worth putting on your bookshelf.

Volume 5

SECRET SOCIETY

The ILLUMINATI

Separating Fact from Fiction

CONRAD BAUER

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Introduction

The Illuminati dominate any discussion of secret societies. Search the web, spark up a conversation, or search through a library shelf and soon enough you will encounter their name. They have become an ancient order and a modern sensation at the same time. They are at once a ubiquitous herald of the new world order and the people who market pop albums, and trying to discern the truth about the organization can get lost amid the hail of noise that inevitably follows any mention of their name. In this book, we hope to do something different. Here we will try to separate fact from fiction and confront the truth about the Illuminati.

In order to achieve this, we have uncovered fifteen of the most frequently asked questions, queries, and accusations that people have relating to the Illuminati. By taking a discerning, informed look at each of these ideas in detail, we will be able to reach the truth that so many people seek but which can be so hard to find. If you have ever wanted a handy guide to cutting through the mess of information that you find online, then this guide will be perfect for you.

Throughout the course of this book, we will look into the origins of the Illuminati, their involvement with the Freemasons, accusations of Satanism thrown at them, the idea that the caused the French Revolution, their involvement with ancient and celebrity cultures, and their appearance on the dollar bill of the United States of America. If you have ever wanted to know the truth about the Illuminati in a simple, easy-to-understand guide, this book is exactly what you need.

The Illuminati and Their Origins

It makes sense to start at the beginning. Even when discussing the early origins of the Illuminati, a cursory glance at the range of sources out there will provide the reader with a hundred different answers. Some say that the society started life in Ancient Egypt, others say that they did not become a real force until the establishment of the United States of America. In this guide, however, we want to discover the provable truth. In this regard, it should be stated for the record that – in spite of the protestations of some people – there is a degree of truth to the Illuminati story. They began life as a legitimate secret society, one with big plans and a restricted membership. So before we go on to look at a few of the more disputed stories surrounding the society, we should take the time to outline exactly what we know and exactly what we can prove. To do this, we will need to travel to Bavaria, Germany, in the 18th Century.

Though the name might have taken on new meaning in the modern age (a point which we shall return to later), the original Illuminati were not only a very real and very secret society, but they really existed, and we can legitimately verify it. In fact, their history has been passed down to us over the course of several centuries. Rather than providing insight into a domineering global conspiracy, the history of the Bavarian group can demonstrate to us how the politics and beliefs of the European Enlightenment were put into practice. Rather than being built on the occult, the strange, and the mysterious, the Illuminati of the 18th Century were formed with very scholarly principles in mind. The story of how they came into being, however, means taking a tour of the halls of German academia of the time.

One of the most important names in this story is Adam Weishaupt, who was working at the time as a professor as the University of Ingolstadt. His specialties were Practical Philosophy and Common Law, giving us something of an indication that he was something of a down-to-earth man.

He was not, however, surrounded by likeminded individuals. The University of Ingolstadt was known to be a predominantly Jesuit institution. The Jesuits – particularly devout and scholarly Catholics – occupied almost every position, to the point where Weishaupt was the only professor who did not count himself among their number. Though ostensibly dissolved in 1773, the Jesuit order continued to endure against the shifting praxis of the Catholic Church. The University was one of their most important institutions and – even if their name was not officially still above the door – they very much controlled the finances for the school.

Figure 1 - Adam Weishaupt

The Jesuits were defined by their devotion to the Christian cause. Unfortunately for them, this was a post reformation world. The efforts of Martin Luther and his fellow reformists had been particularly fruitful in Germany, leading the Catholics – and, in particular, the Jesuits – into difficult times. Fighting to retain control of one of the last bastions of their

power, there was a marked effort within the University to discredit and ostracize any member of staff who was not a member of the Order. Weishaupt was clearly one such person, and his future at the University was seemingly doomed. Anything that was deemed to be in any way liberal or even Protestant was deeply abhorred by the Jesuits, and it is perhaps because of this that Weishaupt found himself pushing back against the institution's ideals with such vigor. He became a consummate preacher of the ideals of the Enlightenment, promoting reason, liberty, progress, and constitutional government as the future. It was a worldview that left little room for the Catholic Church and their teachings. It was inevitable that Weishaupt would find himself in trouble.

However, he was a clever man. Knowing that there was little to be done through soapbox style preaching, Weishaupt decided that he would conduct his affairs in a far more secretive manner. As the idea of forming a secret society grew more and more appealing with each passing day, the professor began to consider potential members for his new group, searching for compatible people who were already in and around the University of Ingolstadt.

One of his first considerations was turning to the Freemasons. We will cover the links between the Freemasons and the Illuminati in greater depth in coming chapters, but their organization structure and secretive approach seemed to be directly in line with the kind of group Weishaupt was hoping to form. There was, however, a major issue. Membership of the Freemasons was a costly endeavor. It would require a fortune to operate such a group under their banner. Weishaupt also felt that there might be ideological opposition from the already entrenched Freemasons. He had his own ideas about the world, his own philosophies, and some of these might clash directly with the way in which Freemasonry operated. Instead, Weishaupt quickly realized that he had little choice but to start his own organization, one which would be imbued with his Enlightenment ideals right from the very start.

That is not to say that Weishaupt could not draw influence from other people and other societies. In particular, he noted the way in which

Freemasonry was organized along a grade system, with members increasing their knowledge and their involvement the closer they moved towards the higher echelons of the order. This seemed, to Weishaupt, to be an adept way of organizing those around him, and it would be perfect for the establishment of a clandestine group within the walls of the University. In order to remain hidden from the Jesuits and the rest of society, borrowing the structure of the Freemasons would allow him to conduct the group's business with a relative confidence in their hidden nature.

The first name Weishaupt considered was the Covenant of Perfectibility (Bund der Perfektibilisten, in the original German). It was under this name that Weishaupt and four carefully selected students from the University first met in 1776 on the 1st of May. Not only did they meet under the name of the Covenant of Perfectibility, but they collectively decided that they would employ the owl of Minerva as their sign. Being a secret society, they soon realized that aliases would be a useful addition to their group, settling on alternative names for all involved. Weishaupt himself became known as Spartacus, while others took names such as Ajax, Tiberius, Agathon, and Erasmus Roterodamus (who were otherwise known as Massenhausen, Merz, Bauhof, and Sutor, respectively). The latter member, Erasmus Roterodamus, would later be expelled from the group, with Weishaupt citing "indolence" as the reason. All of the students studied law and so were in close contact with and already known to Weishaupt. He could trust them, he believed, and he knew them to have similarly inclined political views.

So the Covenant of Perfectibility continued to meet for almost two years, until it was realized that the name was not ideal. It was quickly found that the title was too vague and too strange to function as the name for a potentially world-changing group. Weishaupt's next decision would have ramifications throughout the next few centuries, passing down to us a name that has become famous not only for its association with Weishaupt and his battle against the Jesuits, but one that has also become a hallmark of popular culture. One of the names briefly considered was "the Bee Order," though this was soon rejected. It needed to be not only grandiose and intimidating but also reflective of the group's learned status. And so, in

1778, in the month of April, the group officially retitled itself as the Order of Illuminati (Illuminatenorden in German).

And, just like that, the Illuminati were born. As we will see later in this book, it was not simple sailing from there on out. Weishaupt's efforts to popularize and expand his society would prove to be difficult, with arguments, encounters, and rival groups emerging alongside the Illuminati. However, we can depend on these facts for the very essence of our study into the history of the Illuminati. There are papers and accounts of the group's meeting that are extant to this day, providing documented proof that the Order of Illuminati not only existed, but that it also was established in an 18th Century German University. All of these factors will come to be important when we address questions that appear later in this book, though for now it is very useful in dispelling a number of key misinterpretations about the origin of the Illuminati.

First, the Order of the Illuminati is not referenced in documents, writings, recorded text, or any other kind of scripture before the events of 1778. As such, it is quite easy to counteract against claims that the Illuminati are an ancient secret society that only rose to the surface in the 18th Century. That the group formed by Weishaupt was, at one point, operating under a different name, demonstrates that the title of Illuminati was not an elder group, risen up from the depths of history. It was a creation of the German law professor, but it would prove to be a significant one. As we will see in later chapters, there have been efforts to attribute the Illuminate's existence to a number of iconographical signifiers found through ancient, medieval, and Renaissance art, though these are typically without any foundation. That we have such well-organized and collected accounts of the formation of the Order of Illuminati allows anyone with an evidence-based, empirical, value system to point at a specific juncture in German history as the birth point of the Illuminati.

The second point to counter is the suggestion, less common, that the Illuminati are an American invention. As we have already seen, the year of 1776 was important in the founding of the Illuminati. The group shares this in common with the United States of America, whose history hails July the

4th, 1776 as being the day the country became officially independent from Great Britain. Many have pointed to this slight parallel as being justification enough to suggest collusion between Weishaupt and the American forefathers. However, this is rampant speculation. There exists no evidence of any communication between any of the American leaders at the time and Weishaupt. Furthermore, the name Illuminati was not actually created until two years later. During the formative years of Weishaupt's organization, it is safe to say that men such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson had more important concerns that a small, unheralded, secret society hidden within the walls of a Jesuit university.

That is not to say that they might not have been interested, however. It has been a long-documented fact that the founding fathers of the United States were heavily interested in the principles of the European Enlightenment. The influence can be read in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Many of the ideals that the founding fathers were attempting to imbue in their nascent country were shared by Weishaupt, the kind of principles he wished to spread through the Jesuit-dominated University. Had the two groups (the founding fathers and the Order of Illuminati) sat down around a dinner table, it would not likely have been long before they discovered common ideological ground. While it is an entirely unsupported and almost impossible possibility that the men who helped founded the United States also formed the Illuminati, we can at least concede that there do exist parallels between the two groups. The key difference, however, lies in the fact that Weishaupt's society chose to operate in the shadows, while George Washington et al were very vocal in their defiance.

Thanks to the evidence that we have gathered together, we can place an almost exact starting point on the history of the Illuminati. But as we will see in the next chapter, this history can quickly become complicated.

The Illuminati Are a Secret Sect of Freemasons

It is impossible to understand the history of the Illuminati without mentioning the Freemasons. As one of the most successful secret societies ever conceived, the Freemasons have entered into the popular public consciousness in a way few other organizations have managed. They have outposts all over the world, with these so-called Lodges being found in North America, Europe, the Middle East, and many other places. Often associated with wealth and strange rituals, their organization is said to be built on the accruing of ancient knowledge, ideas that are then used to increase influence and power throughout the world. Many secret societies, whether real or mythical, have been linked with the Freemasons at one point or another. Likewise, many conspiracy theories posit that the Freemasons are the power behind the curtain, influencing events around the world. The Illuminati are no different. But are the Illuminati actually a secret sect of the Freemasons?

The answer is not straightforward, though there are indications that the two organizations have become very intertwined at various points in their histories. More than most, the Illuminati have taken ideas, members, and attention away from the Freemasons, an exchange that has also occurred in the opposite direction. While the answer to many of these questions of fact and fiction regarding the Illuminati can be difficult to answer, there is little doubt that there is a tangible bond between the Freemasons and the Illuminati as they existed in the 18th Century. In order to discover exactly what this bond entailed, we will need to delve once again into the history of the Bavarian order.

After founding the Order of Illuminati, Weishaupt and his fellow members faced one major problem: how to bring more people into the fold. As the University of Ingolstadt was a Jesuit institution, recruiting from the student body was tough and recruiting from the faculty even harder. So it fell on one of the students to handle the bulk of the recruiting work. Massenhausen (Ajax, as he was known) was the most active, especially as he left

Ingolstadt a short time after the group was founded. He went to study in Munich, which proved a rich pool of resources. One of the most significant Illuminati recruits was a man named Xavier von Zwack, who had studied under Weishaupt previously. Von Zwack was embarking on a career in administration, so he would provide the group with an insight into government in the region, especially into the Bavarian National Lottery, where the new recruit was now plying his trade.

Despite the success Massenhausen found in recruiting new Illuminati members, this success quickly soured. Weishaupt began to view the swelling ranks of the Order as a threat, with the student seemingly selecting candidates that were later deemed to be unsuitable. This would later be compounded by a somewhat erratic approach to romantic relationships, an issue that meant Weishaupt could rely little on Massenhausen. In order to remedy the situation, Weishaupt decided that the Munich outpost of the Illuminati should come under new leadership. He trusted Von Zwack to head up what was quickly becoming an important branch of the Order. The civil servant agreed, but soon discovered that Massenhausen's unreliability had been far worse than previously thought. The man had been misappropriating the subscription funds paid by members and had even been reading the private communications between Weishaupt and his former pupil. Accordingly, Massenhausen left the Order of the Illuminati in 1778. Having graduated from Ingolstadt, he took a position in a different region of Germany and resigned himself to having nothing to do with the group. As there were only twelve members by this point, he likely considered himself to be missing out on very little.

Following this period, Von Zwack took on the mantle of chief recruiter. His actions proved more successful, especially as he attempted to bring in a number of more influential and mature people. Of these, Weishaupt was pleased to see a man named Hertel come into the organization. Hertel had been a childhood friend and was now a canon of the government body, the Munich Frauenkirche. By 1778, as the group changed its name to the Order of Illuminati, membership numbers were up to around twenty-seven. They could be found in a number of different German cities, such as Ingolstadt,

Munich, Ravensberg, Freysingen, and Eichstaedt. All of them were given codenames, taken from the cities of Ancient Greece.

But how does this relate to the Freemasons? As the ranks of the Order swelled, Weishaupt decided that he would organize the membership along Masonic lines. For example, there were three grades of involvement. These were Novice, Minerval, and the Illuminated Minerval. These were roughly equivalent to the way in which Freemason lodges organized involvement, in which they assigned (and still assign) members to categories of Apprentice, Journeyman, and Master Mason. Just as in the Freemasons, moving up through the ranks would bring greater insight into the knowledge possessed by the group. In addition, each movement up a rank would be accompanied by something akin to social advancement. When reaching the stage of Illuminated Minerval, the member would finally be shown the technical secrets of the organization, including the secret handshakes, signs, and passwords that provided entry into the innermost circles. This was a structure borrowed almost wholesale from Freemasonry.

Freemasonry is an often misunderstood phenomenon. The origins of the group can be traced back as far the 14th Century, with the Freemasons themselves presenting (and often mythologized) version of their history in their own Old Charges, a collection of historical documents. The Freemasons have for their symbol a compass and square, a logo that can be seen adorning buildings around the world. Walk through any capital country (especially in Europe or the United States) and you will eventually come across the symbol, often carved into stone above a doorway. With members including everyone from local architects to American presidents, the Freemasons are usually well represented at the highest levels. The stories one hears about the Masons can often be deceiving. As with the Illuminati, they find themselves at the center of many mistruths and false attributions (though that is the subject for another book.) Just as with the Illuminati, there is the suggestions of a secret order quietly pulling the strings from the shadows. But the truth of the matter is that – whatever the Freemasons once were – they rarely amount to little more than a social club in today's world. Often joined by businessmen, the influential, and the upwardly mobile, the Masons and their Lodges function as a meeting place for likeminded

people. The organizations are networking clubs, akin to social media for the pre-internet age. Introductions are made, relationships struck up. On a local level, the Lodges serve as a means of putting compatible people in touch for a mutual benefit.

However, the Freemasons are an organization with a great deal of history, and this history can imbue the modern iterations with a seemingly archaic quality. Similarly, at the time when the Illuminati were first discovering how best to organize themselves, the 18th Century Freemasons provided them with a social template. As the Freemasons were a very old society, they had a number of pre-Enlightenment rituals and ceremonies that had been passed down over the years. Many of these rituals are still held today, especially when a member passing from one rank into the next. In the course of moving up through the ranks, a Mason might first swear to fulfil a number of obligations to his Lodge. From there onwards, he might swear to keep the secrets of the Freemasons from both outsiders and those of a lower rank. He will be provided with literature and an opportunity to look into a number of private historical objects that the Masons have preserved. But strangest of all is the fact that some of the Freemasons often include more occult and outlandish rituals. As well as the compass and square, other objects such as the trowel, the level, and the plumb rule are also incorporated into the ceremonies, as well as a so-called moral lesson. These rituals and ceremonies are ostensibly secret, though a number have been revealed and even filmed. To the outsider, not aware of the actions' allegorical meanings, they can appear strange and almost occult. But the truth is that they are often harmless and – at least in the modern age – something akin to theatre. By the time Weishaupt and his followers began to take note of the Masons and their rituals, the ancient wisdom that these rituals were said to represent had long since been forgotten. Instead, their actions mirrored the Freemasons in other ways.

Just as with the Freemasons, the Illuminati began to limit their recruitment strategies to people who fit within a select few demographics. All men were expected to be Christian (as was essentially standard at the time), and people such as Pagans or Jews were expressly prohibited. Alongside these religious requirements, the Illuminati also forbade membership to monks,

women, and those who were involved with any other secret society. Ideally, every single recruit would fit into the same description. That is, they would be between the ages of 18 and 30, financially well-off, docile, and willing to expand their knowledge. With the majority of the recruits coming from current and former university students, membership of the Illuminati was quickly drawn along very set and somewhat privileged lines.

However, as the Illuminati expanded, Weishaupt found that he needed to keep tabs on his growing ranks. This was achieved by a system of counter-espionage, in which certain members spied on other members. Weishaupt was at the center, with many different people feeding him information, often without realizing that they themselves were being recorded. Those who were the most trusted were welcomed into the inner circle, a ruling council that was also known as Areopagus. When selected novices were given permission to go out and recruit, they were given the title of Insinuants.

But recruiting became difficult. The Order's rule requiring members not be involved in other secret societies, in particular, proved to be tough. On several occasions, Weishaupt had to step in to convince his recruits not to join the far larger and more influential Freemasons. This became such an issue that Weishaupt decided that he would join the Freemasons himself in order to gather information for the betterment of the Illuminati. So, rather than the Illuminati emerging from a sect of the Freemasons, the early history of Weishaupt's Order was marked by the difficulty that the Freemasons caused.

Weishaupt moved through the Freemasons' earliest ranks quickly. The Blue Lodge's three degrees (early steps along the path of Freemasonry) passed by with very little noteworthy information. By 1778, Von Zwack was also beginning to conduct research into the secrets of the Freemasons in the hope of benefitting the Illuminati. He came into contact with a man named Abbé Marotti, who claimed to be a priest with a good knowledge of the higher echelons of Masonry. According to Marotti, the secret knowledge of the Freemasons was related to ancient religions and the very earliest years of the church. It was enough to convince Von Zwack that there was more to the Freemasons than a simple structural quality that could be gained. He reached out to Weishaupt and advised that the two secret societies should join their forces or at least enjoy a friendly relationship. By the end of 1778, Weishaupt's lack of success in moving up through the ranks, as well as the information from the priest, led to a changed attitude within the Illuminati. They decided to establish a Lodge of their own.

Such was the organizational structure of the Freemasons that setting up a Lodge was almost like setting up a franchise. Weishaupt and his fellow Illuminati sent a warrant to the Grand Lodge located in Prussia – the regional headquarters, so to speak – and after a small array of difficulties, were eventually permitted to establish their own Masonic Lodge. They named it Theodore of the Good Council, a name chosen specifically to flatter and appeal to Charles Theodore, the Elector of Bavaria. The Lodge was founded in 1779, and in no time, the members were almost entirely Illuminati.

Within a few months, the Illuminati had total control of the Masonic outpost. Their next goal was to ensure that they would be able to operate independently, free from the instructions passed down by the Grand Lodge. To do this, Weishaupt and his fellow members put themselves in touch with other Lodges around Germany. In doing so, they built up relationships that eventually allowed them to operate outside of the influence of the Grand Lodge and to be recognized in their own right. They used clever internal politics and machinations to surgically remove themselves from the main Masonic host. Once it had been declared independent – and this independence recognized by other Lodges –the Theodore of the Good Council (which was, by now, just another name for the Illuminati) was permitted to create and run smaller Lodges whenever they pleased. The franchise was now allowed to create new franchises in their own self-image.

So why is this important, and how does it tie the Illuminati to the Freemasons? It should be stated at this stage that the Freemasons were a far larger, continent-wide concern. What was happening in some remote region of Germany was likely of little interest to the men running the Freemasons. But what the Masons did have was a structure and an operating organizational body. This allowed them to recruit and provided them with some form of acceptable existence. Though many countries had outlawed secret societies, the Freemasons had enough history that most people – at least, those who might be recruited – were at least aware of their existence. This kind of authenticity was something Weishaupt and his Illuminati lacked. Having seen the Freemasons operate in such a way, the Illuminati coveted the rival organization. Weishaupt's plan was essentially parasitic. Moving in under the guise of joining the club, the Illuminati adjoined themselves to the host body, fed off the structural and recruiting benefits of the organization, and used the Freemasons to make themselves stronger. Once they felt suitably empowered, the Illuminati began to break away and grow increasingly independent. While there might have been esoteric designs on ancient knowledge held within the Masonic walls, it was the functionality, the resources, and the reputation that the Illuminati truly lacked. Weishaupt's group already had an ideology and an ethos. What they

lacked was the ability to put these ideas into practice. By siphoning away their needs from the Freemasons, the Illuminati were able to maneuver their own society into a greater, more powerful position.

As such, there might be some truth to the idea that the Illuminati are a secret sect of the Freemasons. Certainly, at a pivotal moment in the history of Weishaupt's Order, the Illuminati were very much tied to their own Masonic Lodge. They existed and operated within the Freemasons, using the platform for their own benefit. But while this is true, it is important to note that the Freemasons were often little aware of what was happening. To tie the two groups together would be dishonest. At the time, the Illuminati were like the mosquito sitting on the neck of the sleeping man. The man might notice, wave his hand in the direction of some minor irritation, and then roll over and fall back asleep. Once the mosquito has taken its fill, it would simply fly away. At the time, the Illuminati were incomparable to the Freemasons. But at the time, all they needed was a small boost in order to raise their profile and recruit men like Adolph Knigge. As we will see in later chapters, Masonic recruits such as Knigge would help determine the course of the Illuminati in the coming years. This sharing of recruits and structural organizations would be the biggest gift imparted to the Illuminati from the Freemasons and would be their biggest point of comparison. It would not be, however, a long term relationship.

The Illuminati Guard an Ancient Secret

As with the majority of conspiracy theories, many of the stories told about the Illuminati depend on secrets. If the old adage is true, then knowledge is power. Some people take this further, suggesting that the most powerful secret societies in the history of the world have held on to some great hidden truth that grants them exceptional influence. It is said of the Knights Templar, who supposedly excavated a buried treasure on Jerusalem's Temple Mount during the Crusades. It has been said of the Priory of Sion, who supposedly guarded the secret of the extant descendants of Jesus Christ, before they were proven to be a small-time hoax blown out of proportion. And it had been said many times about the Freemasons, who supposedly guarded great secrets that were made known to only the highest ranking members of the organization.

In the case of the Freemasons, this is likely due to the way in which the society came into the world. One need only look at the name of the society itself to discover that "Masons" is not just a title. During the Medieval period, when the first rumblings of organization were gathering in European cities, masons were important people. Roughly equivalent to today's architects, they guarded the knowledge required to build the most impressive of buildings. These mathematical doctrines told members how to cut stone properly and how to construct a load-bearing wall. In a time when society was largely illiterate, these ideas were almost magic in their execution. And because they were trade secrets, they were not just passed along to anyone. Almost like a modern union, the Masons gathered together and shared the techniques of their craft. To learn them, one would first need to be an apprentice, a journeyman, and then a master. As time went on and more and more people were admitted to the ranks, these traditional secrets took on a more allegorical quality. The compass and square that are still the logo of the Freemasons are no longer just tools of the trade, but rather represent the ideals of knowledge and logic that the Masons hold dear. While they might have once been a closely guarded secret, they served to

form the basis of the Order before taking on a more mystical meaning in later life.

So how does this affect the Illuminati? At the time we left them, they were beginning to infiltrate the ranks of Freemasonry. Having established their own independent Lodge, they were closer than ever to the central knowledge possessed by the Freemasons. But still Weishaupt was not satisfied. Having joined the Freemasons and found nothing mystical that would help his own secret society, he began to turn the majority of his attention back towards the Illuminati. Besides, the Illuminati had their own ideals to guard. They were founded on their own traditions and ideologies. Formed on the principles of the Age of Enlightenment, the Freemasons' ancient proclivity for architecture might have seemed altogether more practical for a professor of Civic Law and philosophy.

This is where Adolph Knigge comes into the story. Having been one of the recruits who came into the Illuminati in 1780, he had been a Freemason with big ideas. Having joined the older society and sped through the ranks, he had been filled with dramatic ideas and innovations that he thought could be implemented. When he reached the higher ranks of Freemasonry, his disappointment was palpable. Any plans that he suggested for reform and modernization were quickly rejected. This is when he met Costanzo Marchese di Costanzo, already a member of the Illuminati and one of the order's best recruiters. He noticed Adolph Knigge's disappointment in the Freemasons and let him in on a secret: the kind of plans Knigge possessed were already being put into motion in certain secret circles. A short time later, Knigge had been recruited into the Illuminati.

Figure 2 - Adolph Freiherr Knigge

Rather than the Freemasons initiations, which typically hinted towards their technical past, the entrance materials for the Illuminati were decidedly more intellectual. At the time, the very idea of liberal literature was outlawed in Bavaria (and indeed, many other regions of Europe). Some of the most progressive ideas that were born out of the Enlightenment were illegal. In certain Protestant countries, these materials were widely circulated. They offered criticism of the Catholic Church, as well as other Enlightenment writings on matters such as liberty and an opposition to absolute monarchy. They promoted science, empiricism, and a questioning of the surrounding world. It is easy to see why such materials might be deemed detrimental to the Bavarian state. But for anyone interested in joining the Illuminati, for those men who had demonstrated themselves as being open to such ideas, these were the mystical ideas that lay at the center of the Illuminati and marked them out as being a dangerous and almost revolutionary group. Knigge, along with a number of his close friends, seemed to be open to such ideas.

One of the best recruiting grounds for the early Illuminati members was the young, disillusioned men who found society too traditional and unwilling to change. Secret societies offered them the potential means by which they could meet and discuss such reforms. Before the internet age or the rise of the mass media, such meetings were incredibly valuable. To the state, they were incredibly dangerous. For most people, the Freemasons were the most obvious choice of secret society, almost the ubiquitous name that was commonly associated with the very idea of a secret society. But as we have seen with Knigge, the size of the organization was often its undoing. As there were so many Freemasons, it was harder to chart a course into more revolutionary waters. In order to accomplish that, one would have to join a society that was founded on the very principles that Knigge and similarly minded men were hoping to promote. They would need to join the Illuminati.

As such, the literature which Costanzo provided was the Illuminati's material for passing into the Minerval grade. Though the materials proved distasteful to Knigge's three companions, Knigge himself discovered exactly what he was looking for. Rather than an ancient secret or traditional mysticism that many people associate with the Illuminati in the modern age, the group was instead founded on progressive and somewhat radical ideas. These were illegal ideas, dangerous philosophies, but to a man like Knigge, they seemed to be the future. There is a truth to the idea that the Illuminati were built on a secret, but it is false to describe that secret as ancient. Instead, the Enlightenment principles discussed within the clandestine walls of the Illuminati were on the cutting edge of contemporary philosophy.

Knigge's recruitment was important for a number of reasons. While we might not know the exact materials he read (only their nature), it demonstrates the kind of person to whom the Illuminati seemed appealing. In many respects, he was the quintessential recruit for Weishaupt's order. Young, scholarly, rich, and with a desire to discuss very important ideas, Knigge would almost become the poster boy for Illuminati membership. As well as this, however, it was important for the effect that Knigge would have upon the Order in the coming years. Knigge himself was somewhat

flattered by being welcomed into the Illuminati. The society's attentions were something of a compliment and a confirmation of the ideas he had developed privately. He appreciated the principles on which the Illuminati were built, namely a quest to educate the people of the world and protect them from the despotism of monarchy.

However, in addition to these founding ideals, Weishaupt met with Knigge and the two discussed other subjects. While Knigge talked about plans for reforming groups such as the Freemasons, he also convinced Weishaupt of the benefits of the so-called "higher sciences," such as alchemy. By the end of their discussions, Weishaupt threw his support behind Knigge, and quickly the new recruit found his position within the society rising exponentially. But in order to break into the highest ranks, Knigge would have to prove himself. Weishaupt set him the challenge of recruiting new members of exceptional quality. Knigge agreed, but only on the basis that he would be allowed to select where the recruits were taken from. When everything was agreed, Knigge returned, once again, to the Freemasons.

By now, it was clear that the Freemasons were a fertile source of recruits. While Freemasonry might have once possessed a secret cadre of knowledge, Knigge was able to recruit people to the Illuminati by revealing to them the most current and progressive materials around at the time. The Illuminati were the future, the coming order of things. At the time, however, there was a problem. In an effort to give the Illuminati some degree of credibility, Weishaupt had constructed an elaborate back story for the group. This information was said to be made available to the highest ranking members of the groups, though snippets were teased to potential new recruits. Weishaupt outlined this history to Knigge, telling him about the "Most Serene Superiors," a seemingly cosmic force whom the Illuminati served, along with a fictitious history of the Order that stretched back long before the real founding date. Knigge, though mostly successful in his recruitment, found the stories hard to remember. It was something of an embarrassment when the new poster boy for the Illuminati could not recall their supposed history.

Not deterred by Knigge's inability to impart the Illuminati's invented past, Weishaupt looked upon the recruitment he conducted as largely successful; so much so that he tasked Knigge with creating and executing one of the Order's first real actions: the distribution of a pamphlet that detailed the continued existence and practice of the Jesuits. The pamphlet showed the reader how the supposedly outlawed Jesuits were still in fact preaching and practicing in Bavaria. It was the first time that the Illuminati crossed over and made an impact on the world outside of their internal discussions. Knigge was satisfied with the work in distributing the pamphlet but wrote to Weishaupt in 1781 admitting to his own concern that he was unable to convincingly answer questions about the Illuminati's most mystical histories. As Weishaupt began to realize that he might lose Knigge and all the good work the man was doing, he admitted to having created the entire history. The "Most Serene Superiors" were an invention, the ancientness of the Illuminati was a construction, and many of the higher order of the society had not yet even been written.

This, more than anything else, can highlight the lack of an ancient secret that was being guarded by the Illuminati. There was certainly an awareness within the group that such inventions could prove to be useful, perhaps in a similar manner to the way in which the Freemasons used their history; an allegorical lesson. However, it did not sit well with the supposedly radical literature which the Illuminati themselves enjoyed. While it might have been expected that Knigge was shocked and appalled by such lies, he seemed to be quite the opposite. In fact, Weishaupt and Knigge discussed the matter calmly. Even with the revelation that he would not be learning some secret hidden truth belonging to the Masons or anything of the sort, Knigge was promised that he would be brought closer to the central power of the Illuminati. Alongside Weishaupt, he could read the original notes and help craft some of the ideas that would be passed down to those most trusted members. Knigge saw this as an opportunity to spread some of his own philosophies and ideas. As he claimed, these new ideas would make the Illuminati an even more attractive prospect for likeminded young Germans. As such, Knigge was given 50 florins by the Illuminati council (the Areopagus) and sent on what resembled a diplomatic mission.

By this point in the history of the Illuminati, it was clear to many people that there was no great secret hidden away in the coffers of the Illuminati. As we have traced their existence from its inception, we can be clear on such a matter. But for those who came late to the party – like Adolph Knigge – the matter was not so set in stone. With other organizations such as the Freemasons teasing potential recruits with the possibility that there might be some ancient occult secret that they will learn only when they reach the higher levels, the Illuminati seemed to be certain that they too should have this potential. But, as we have seen in the writing of Knigge, the entirety of the Illuminati history at this stage was a poorly built construction. It was one that Weishaupt or his Areopagus had not even bothered to finish. While there are suggestions in the modern age that the Illuminati were founded on some ancient principle, the truth is far more interesting. The order came into existence purely to propagate and further very new ideas. As we will see in coming chapters, such ideas would form the backbone of many of the accusations later levelled at the Illuminati. But in a much more immediate way, they would cause a great deal of internal strife. While there is no closely guarded historical secret behind the Illuminati, we will soon learn how they struggled to formulate their own future. Before one sets out to conquer the world, it helps to have one's affairs in order.

The Illuminati Control the World

Travelling as we are through the history of the Illuminati, it is time to confront one of the most enduring myths that circulates around the Order. While we have seen in previous chapters that some of the accusations levelled at the Illuminati do have merit and can at least be worth discussing, the idea that the Illuminati control the world is a very modern suggestion. As we will see in this chapter, they struggled at first to control their own members. Filled with internal conflicts, divisions in ideology, and disagreements over the future actions of the Order, it is important to see the Illuminati as a very human construct. Just like any other human construct, those within it are very prone to human failings. Rather than a single, driven entity that pulls the strings from the shadow, this chapter will reveal exactly how divided and difficult the members of the Illuminati found it to put their ideas into practice.

In 1780, just a few years after the original founding of the Illuminati, Weishaupt found himself in a difficult place. Though the order was still very much in its early stages, the membership numbers had grown well. For a secret society, they had managed to spread the word of their presence and were beginning to generate something of a reputation, at least in certain regions of Bavaria. However, there were divisions within the Illuminati. As the founder, Weishaupt might have expected total autonomy over the group. But the Areopagus did not agree. Those on the council seemed to find Weishaupt to be something of a dictator; his approach was inconsistent and marked by stubbornness. One of the only times he had offered to concede ground – when Knigge looked like he might leave – proved to be the apparent solution. Knigge became something of a go-between and a peacemaker, talking to both the Areopagus and Weishaupt.

Knigge quickly realized that there were many problems within the Illuminati. If they were to advance as an organization, then Knigge would have to tackle such difficulties. The first of these lay in the recruitment policy. It should be quite obvious that the success of a secret society lives or

dies on its recruitment tactics. Try to recruit too many people, and the authorities will quickly become aware. Try to recruit too few, and you run the risk of the group failing to grow. Recruit the wrong members, and you will find that the society is incapable of achieving its original goal. It becomes a difficult balancing act, which is why successful recruiters like Knigge were so appreciated, and unsuccessful recruiters like Massenhausen were quick to leave the order.

For his part, Weishaupt had placed an emphasis on recruiting university students. This is perhaps understandable for a professor in a Jesuit institution who saw his pupils as potential minds he could save on a regular basis. But the resulting effect of this strategy meant that many of the more senior positions within the Illuminati were quickly filled with bright, energetic, and enthusiastic young men who critically lacked any administrative experience. Instead of these younger recruits, the Areopagus felt that it would be better served by recruiting older, more experienced men, likely from the Freemasons. But therein lay a second problem. As Knigge saw it, those older and more experienced Freemasons would likely be perturbed by the Illuminati's anti-religious (specifically anti-Jesuit) stance. What had started as something of a distrust of the Jesuits had turned into a general anti-religious sentiment throughout many areas of the Illuminati.

Das
verbeſſerte Syſtem
der
Illuminaten
mit allen
ſeinen Graden und Einrichtungen.
Herausgegeben von
Adam Weishaupt
Herzoglich Sachſ. Goth. Hofrath.
Hic ſitus eſt Phaeton, currus auriga paterni:
Quem ſi non tenuit; magnis tamen excidit auſis.
Ovid. Met. B. 2.
Neue und vermehrte Auflage.
Frankfurt und Leipzig,
in der Grattenaueriſchen Buchhandlung. 1788.

Figure 3 - Illuminati pamphlet from 1788

It was a problem particular to Bavaria. In this part of Europe, the Catholics were still in control. Elsewhere, the Reformation had seen an upheaval in the way religion was practiced. While still technically Christian, the schism between Catholicism and Protestantism was huge. Many people died as a result of their beliefs. Wars were fought. To the anti-religious in the midst of Catholic-controlled Bavaria, such an opposition might seem justifiable, at least according to Knigge. But the people who the Areopagus hoped to recruit? The older, more influential men? They might be put off by such a stance. If the Illuminati hoped to spread beyond Bavaria, then this religious

distaste would have to be tempered. Both Weishaupt and the Areopagus recognized the issues, but both found themselves with little solution other than to place their trust in Knigge to find a resolution. Thanks to the man's contacts, he could make inroads into Freemason recruitment, untainted by any obvious association with anti-religious views. He also possessed the ritualistic skill that was required in order to refine the grade structure of the Illuminati. They were still keen to make use of the Freemason's approach, but their efforts to write and build a progressive system of advancement within the order (including rituals for passing up a grade and so on) had ground to a halt. Knigge was given the task of writing and implementing these rituals, as well as going out into the wider world to head up the recruitment. There were a couple of conditions, in that he must submit his ritual ideas for approval and would need to discuss many of his choices before implementing changes to the highest grades. But beyond that, he had autonomy to work on behalf of the Illuminati as he saw fit.

Marchese di Costanzo was given the task of writing to the Royal York (one of the administrative centers for the Lodges in the area) and politely mention that there was something of a discrepancy between the fees that were offered to the Grand Lodge by the Illuminati's Lodge Theodore and the services and benefits they received in return. By this point, Lodge Theodore had become a profitable venture for the Royal York, who noticed the large increase in subscription fees that had come from the Illuminati's cover venture. Not wanting to lose out on this money, the Royal York proposed a solution. In return for the continued subscriptions, the Lodge Theodore would receive more access to the great secrets of the Freemasons. Should the Illuminati send a representative up to Berlin, he would be able to learn these secrets in person. Costanzo himself was again chosen by Knigge to make the journey. He set off during April of 1780, hoping to reach Prussia in fairly quickly. Once there, he was to be given the secret instruction that he was to find some way of lowering the amount the Illuminati were paying to the Freemasons. But Costanzo was delayed en route, having gotten into a heated argument with a Frenchman he had encountered in his carriage. The two had fallen out over a lady who happened to be travelling with them, so much so that the Frenchman took the time to send a message ahead to the carriage's destination, Berlin. It

warned the King that Costanzo was in fact a spy. The message was enough that Costanzo was immediately locked away upon entering Berlin. He was only released when the Grand Master of the Freemason's Grand York personally intervened. But there was nothing the man could do to prevent Costanzo from being banished, and the Illuminati man was sent back to the Areopagus without having accomplished anything at all. It was just one of the difficulties that Knigge would have to deal with.

One of the major issues that Knigge faced came from the Areopagus's efforts to insert the Illuminati into the more legitimate Freemasonry as an official branch of the organization. The Illuminati already controlled Lodge Theodore, though it found itself lacking in local power thanks to a nearby Lodge that pulled rank. The complicated system of Freemason autonomy meant that – while the Illuminati held much control over their own Lodge – they found themselves having to bow to the nearby Elect Masters. There had been efforts to similarly infiltrate this group, but only one Illuminati member had succeeded. This meant that – for now – there was no way of transforming the Lodge Theodore into an official combination of the Illuminati and the Freemasons. By the end of January, 1781, Knigge had managed to convince members of the Masters Elect to increase the power of the Lodge Theodore, to the point where the Illuminati could create smaller Lodges in their own image. But true independence was in no way, shape, or form about to be discussed. Never mind giant global conspiracies; the Illuminati were struggling to control the secret societies in a small region of Bavaria.

That the organization was so quickly lost and at a crossroads can be a good demonstration of how difficult it can be to entirely take over the world. If we're to believe the conspiracy theories, the global Illuminati network has long been pulling the strings behind every major event for the past two centuries. But that this stage of their existence, barely five years from being a thought in Weishaupt's mind, the Illuminati found themselves falling prey to internal struggles and squabbles. This is important as it reveals the very nature of the organization and why the idea of prolonged, hidden, and effective power is inherently flawed. At their heart – whether that meant Weishaupt, Knigge, or the Areopagus – there was no agreement. Opinions

pulled in every direction. This very human quality – to entertain one's own opinions – means that sustained power of the sort described in the conspiracy theories is incredibly unlikely. As we will see in the coming chapters, managing to maintain control and direction for the Illuminati in just a few years can be almost beyond possible. So how was Knigge set to handle this existential threat to the Illuminati?

Knigge quickly realized that – if he was to have any success in extracting a better deal from the Freemasons – he would have to go to a higher power. However, this was always going to be difficult. Knigge was aware that any communications or any petitions to Lodges in London and other far-flung countries would always have been too obvious. Any attempt to gain autonomy in the form of a constitution would quickly become obvious that the Illuminati were working towards their own independence. Far from controlling the world, there was little the Illuminati could do to control local Masonic Lodges. Until this was possible, they would have to slow down their plans for expansion.

While the plans for expansion were slowed down, Knigge turned his attentions inwards. Having cooled the heated relationship between Weishaupt and the Areopagus, he began to focus on the other aspects of his tasks. This included revising the structure of the Illuminati. As it was, they controlled three Masonic Lodges, and Knigge decided that following the structure of the Freemasons remained the best option. By 1782, on the 20th of January, he put forward his new grade system. Once this was approved, the Illuminati would be structure along three distinct classes. These were:

Class I – The Nursey
This would be the first order that people entered into and would contain the Noviciate, the Minerval, and the Illuminatus Minor.

Class II – The Masonic Grades
These were borrowed wholesale from the Freemasons, though they were titled there as Apprentice, Companion, and Master. After these members could advance to a second tier within Class II, which included the Scottish Novice and the Scottish King. Class II clearly took influence directly from the Masons.

Class III – The Mysteries
The upper echelon of Illuminati membership, these were separated into the lesser mysteries, order that were titled Priest and Prince, and the greater mysteries, which were titled Mage and King. So difficult was it to enter into these higher positions that it was unlikely that the rituals or ceremonies for these tiers were ever even written down.

Having laid out a new structure for the group, Knigge began to reform the Illuminati along his own views. Having grown disillusioned with the Freemasons for not ascribing to his own ideals, here was a chance to reshape the Illuminati only a few years after they had come into existence. Far from a global order, they were still very much a local concern. Knigge, however, hoped to change that. As ever, the solution lay in recruitment.

Whereas the Illuminati recruitment had been something of an experimental system up to this point, Knigge decided to take a much more deliberate approach. This time, aware of the difficulties he faced from the Freemasonry upper levels, he decided that he would target men already in positions of power. Whereas Weishaupt had favored impressionable students who he could mold in his image, Knigge wanted men of power and influence, especially those who were already wardens or masters within existing Lodges. Once such people were recruited, it would place the entire administrative capability of the Lodge under Illuminati control. Baron de Witte, who was master of the Constancy Lodge in Aachen, was one such recruit. After he was brought into the fold by Knigge, he succeeded in turning every Freemason in his Lodge into an Illuminati member. This change in strategy brought with it a rapid expansion, far quicker and of greater quality than in the preceding years. After only a short time, it

seemed as though Knigge and his tactics were working. By the spring of 1782, the Illuminati found they had a foothold in Austrian Lodges, with their numbers totaling around 300. Unlike the original recruits, only 20 or so of the new wave were actually students.

Around this time, Weishaupt noticed that not all of the people in Lodge Theodore were entirely on board with the Illuminati's presence. Those who had been Freemasons before the Illuminati had arrived or had joined under the guise of Freemasonry were beginning to grumble. Weishaupt, sticking to his principles despising despotism, offered the Lodge a deal. He would willingly split the Lodge in two and allow those who wanted nothing to do with the Illuminati to go their own way. Somewhat unexpectedly, few people took him up on the offer and, quite quickly, Lodge Theodore was entirely under the control of Weishaupt and the Illuminati.

Now that they had the full backing of their Lodge, a growing influence, and greater numbers, the Illuminati felt justified in trying to exert their power. The Order wrote to the Royal York and informed the Freemason authorities that Lodge Theodore intended to "sever relations" with headquarters. As a means of justifying their actions, the Illuminati listed their consistent and dutiful paying of fees, for which they had not received greater insight into the Masonic world, for which their own member (Costanzo) had been poorly treated, and a general inability by the Royal York to provide support. Lodge Theodore, they declared, was now to be considered entirely independent and entirely autonomous.

At the time, the Freemasons themselves facing a great deal of internal turmoil. Having existed for far longer than the Illuminati, they had themselves succumb to many of the same problems. Schisms and internal disagreements had led to the establishing of many different branches and interpretations of Freemasonry. Just as with the Illuminati, the Freemasons found themselves squabbling and unable to move forward. Unlike the Illuminati, this was complicated by the fact that the Freemasons were an international organization. Prince Carl of Södermanland, for example, was ostensibly the leader of the Rite of Strict Observance. But he had been accused of attempting to bring the Rite into the fold of the Swedish Rite, to

the annoyance of many members. The German Lodges began to look elsewhere and depended on Duke Ferdinand (who was in charge of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel) for guidance. Duke Ferdinand disagreed with Prince Carl, while many of the Freemasons disagreed with everyone else. In the background, somewhat quietly, the Illuminati were happy that the attentions were being diverted elsewhere. It allowed them the opportunity to solidify their power base. While the Freemasons began to focus on what would become the Convent of Wilhelmsbad, the Illuminati, led by Knigge and Weishaupt, were overseeing increasing successes.

But therein lay the problem with suggesting that the Illuminati were in any way a global concern, or that their influence today depends on an 18th Century domination of political thought. Instead, the organization was only able to control a small region in Germany and nearby. Rather than influencing all of Europe, their rise was marked by the very same problems that befell the Freemasons. Arguments, disagreements, and human nature. As we will see in the next chapter, they would have to put these aside if they were to take advantage of an amazing opportunity.

The Illuminati Were Just Lucky

Not all of the stories about the Illuminati position them as a clandestine society behind every major event of the past three centuries. In some versions of their history, they have been described as being simply lucky. They chanced into an opportune moment, or so the story goes. In order to remain both fair and impartial, efforts should be made to look at every side of an argument. If we are quick to disprove that the Illuminati were one of the world's most secretly powerful organizations, we should just as easily be able to prove that this was still a society built by intelligent men with very firm ideas about how they were able to change the world. So, were the Illuminati just lucky, or were they able to make some very intelligent moves towards reorganizing the world in their own image? As ever, the truth lies somewhere between the two positions.

It is certainly true that the Illuminati benefitted from timing. At a critical juncture in their history, when they were hoping to expand and recruit a greater number of more influential people, their chief rivals happened to be going through something of a crisis. As it stood, the divisions and arguments that had surfaced within the Freemasons meant that the Illuminati were presented with an excellent opportunity to take advantage of the chaos for their own benefit. In terms of providing the Illuminati with an opportunity, few moments seemed as opportune as the Convent of Wilhelmsbad. The very same Lodge that Weishaupt had joined some years previous was now seemingly tearing itself apart. The schisms that emerged within the Rite of the Strict Observance threatened to destroy Freemasonry in Bavaria and beyond. But what exactly were they arguing about?

The matter was somewhat complicated, but it came to a head in the early 1780s. Having been originally planned for late 1781, the Wilhelmsbad Convent was reorganized for July of 1782. It would prove to be the last meeting of the Strict Observance as people knew it. Organized in the spa town of Wilhelmsbad, the Convent was organized to determine the future of the Strict Observance, and thus the future of the biggest and most influential

Masonic Lodge in the region. In simple terms, there were two sides to the argument. On one side were those who favored the German approach to Freemasonry that emphasized the Germanic and mystical elements of the Masons. This group was led by Duke Ferdinand and Prince Charles. On the other side of the argument were the Martinists, a branch of Christian esoteric mysticism that focused on the fall from grace of mankind and how the species could be reintegrated into this divine knowledge. Both sides claimed to hold sway over the Freemason's Lodges in the region, with their chief disagreements concerning the ritualistic elements of the Masons. Both sides differed on how they felt the ceremonies and rituals should be organized, how they should be conducted, and which one was right. The Martinists were led by Jean-Baptiste Willermoz. The two sides disagreed over which route the Strict Observance should take.

But it should also be noted that there were certain voices at the gathering that did not agree with either side. Johann Joachim Christoph Bode was one such high ranking Mason, who seemed to be appalled by the prospect of the Martinists and openly offered his dissent towards the mystical aspects of the higher grades of the Freemasons. The real problem for Bode was that he did not have an alternative solution to promote. Also opposed to both main sides was Franz Dietrich von Ditfurth, the Master of a Lodge in Wetzlar named the Joseph of the Three Helmets Lodge. Ditfurth was also a judge, a respected and influential member of his local community. He was also a member of the Illuminati. Acting as something of a representative for the Order, he made his voice heard in public, calling for a back to basics approach. Freemasonry should, he claimed, return to the three basic degrees of Novice, Journeyman, and Master. All of the mystical elements distracted from the work of the Freemasons. Despite the respect many held for Ditfurth, the sheer numbers on the other sides meant that his proposal was the least likely to be decided upon. As it stood, both mystical sides of the argument held their own plans for reforming the upper grades of Freemasonry, but neither could honestly claim that they were clear and well thought out. Everyone knew they wanted change, but had very little idea of what that change should be.

This was ideal for the Illuminati. As luck would have it, the divisions between the Masons opened up in front of them and allowed the Order to fill the void, presenting themselves as a credible alternative. Ditfurth was the chief representative at the meetings, though he was ably assisted by Knigge, who was working behind the scenes. Knigge had been given total autonomy by the Illuminati leaders to act on their behalf, and he had come up with a plan. The first option he suggested had been to try to broker an alliance between all sides, with the Illuminati acting as the peacemakers. This would, it was thought, increase trust in Knigge, Weishaupt, and the rest of the Illuminati and provide them with a greater platform of power. Weishaupt was quick to dash this theory, however, seeing little profitability in being allied to what he saw as a dying institution. Seeing the Illuminati as the future, he and Knigge developed a plan whereby they would kindle the divisions between the Freemasons and then recruit those members whom they liked best, being as they appeared the only credible party. This would allow the Illuminati to turn the Freemasons' divisions to their own advantage, swelling their ranks with the best and brightest while ensuring an influential and powerful crop of new recruits to act out Illuminati policies.

The plan was put into action by Ditfurth, acting on the behalf of the others. As Willermoz put forward ideas for the Martinists, and Prince Charles attempted to explain the German mystics' proposals, Ditfurth made moves to block their actions. Such proposals could not be put into action, he argued, without the full details of the ceremonies and rituals being revealed to every single delegate. How else could they vote fairly without knowing what they were voting for? As it stood, both the German mystics and the Martinists wanted to institute new rituals, imbued with what they considered to be ancient knowledge. But these rituals were only to be learned once a member reached a high enough rank. The delegates in attendance were not at such a rank and could therefore not be permitted to see either of the proposals for higher grades. The frustration on both sides was clear, but Ditfurth had easily convinced the delegates, prompted by Knigge's maneuvering.

Such was the annoyance on behalf of the German mystics that they showed the first signs of being willing to compromise. The Illuminati – through Ditfurth – had finally put together an alternative solution. All of the highest grades would simply be scrapped. What had descended into a complex mix of rites and ceremonies would be abandoned, and the highest tier would simply be a fourth level, one which promised no revelations of ancient knowledge and no source of mystical power. The German mystics could see that this was far from what was being proposed and could identify the Illuminati as an increasingly credible threat. They put forward Count Kollowrat from their ranks to join up to the new Order, planting someone in the Illuminati ranks who might be able to nurture an alliance in the coming times.

But despite Ditfurth's efforts to promote the Illuminati as a credible alternative, his proposals fell on deaf ears. There was a clear intention at the Covenant of Wilhelmsbad to clarify the mess that the higher ranks of the Freemasons had become, but the Illuminati's solution went too far. Though it was simple and easy to understand, many felt that the esoteric mysticism was an essential part of the Freemasons' rituals and could not be so easily abandoned. Ditfurth was quick to notice his failure to convince many people. He left the venue ahead of schedule and dispatched a note to the Areopagus informing them of his failure. Nothing good, he wrote, could be expected to come of the gathering.

Though it appeared on the surface as though the illuminati had failed, the real aftermath of the events at Wilhelmsbad were yet to be understood. The Convent had been intended to repair the schisms that had appeared in the Freemasons at this time. But, with everyone so keen to leave everyone satisfied, the gathering had instead had the opposite effect. No one got what they wanted. There were minor administrative changes made to the higher grades of membership, though little in effect actually changed. Those who had been in charge at the start of the assembly remained in power, meaning that all of the political maneuvering and conniving was very much still apparent. The same power struggle for dominance within the Bavarian Freemasons remained in place, with each and every Lodge increasingly convinced of both their own independence and their own superiority. This

was likely realized, as there was a concerted effort at the end of the assembly to try and make it look as though changes had been made. A great deal of noise was made regarding the numbering of the Lodges, changes in etiquette, and the titles applied to certain positions. Though these could be held up as products of the Convent, they actually made little difference and did nothing to repair the damage that had been apparent at the start of the meetings.

So even while Ditfurth had believed himself to have lost, he and the Illuminati benefitted from the fact that no one else won. So little progress was made that the Illuminati were able to stand by and watch as the Strict Observance did nothing to save itself from inevitable collapse. The Strict Observance made a number of key errors. They denounced and disowned their own origin myth, as well as reorganizing the higher grades. This latter change meant that their highest ranking members before the alterations were now no longer bound to the Strict Observance. While the group had been defined by (and had very much benefitted from) the strict control that gave them their title, this was now seemingly abandoned, and the process of power devolution undermined the central authority of the group. Many of the additions to the rules and rituals were enough to appall certain members, with people such as Bode being horrified by the addition of Martinist principles. Almost immediately, Bode began talks with Knigge and was a fully-fledged member of the Illuminati by January of 1783. Just a month later, Charles of Hesse had been recruited in a similar fashion.

Without really doing anything, the Illuminati had strengthened themselves. Their biggest rival and the blockage to their unfettered recruitment was steadily imploding and seemingly unable to stop it. Rather than benefitting from any single genius move or some great masterstroke from Knigge, the Illuminati were fortunate that their rivals were so shortsighted. However, they must be given some credit for positioning themselves into a place where they benefited from such an implosion. More opportunistic than Machiavellian, but more orchestrated than blind luck, there was a fine balance to the politicking of the Illuminati. And it was not yet finished, as the Illuminati still had one or two tricks up their sleeve.

Even though Knigge's attempts at making an alliance with many of the other German Lodges had failed, the Illuminati did not give up. These were the perfect recruiting grounds, and being able to share resources with other Masonic Lodges would be a huge boost to their ambitions. It fell on Weishaupt to take over the process. Though Knigge was by this point the driving force behind many of the Illuminati's actions, Weishaupt still played an important role in the organization. After all, he had founded the entire Order. In the aftermath of the Convent of Wilhelmsbad, he proposed a different alliance for the German Lodges, one which neatly sidestepped the divisive issue. Under Weishaupt's proposal, the Lodges would be allied together in a kind of federation. Inside the federation, every Lodge would practice a uniform, agreed-upon system across the first three (traditional) degrees of Freemasonry. Once members reached the next tiers, it would be down to the individual Lodges as to how they would proceed. In addition to this, a member of any of the allied Lodges could pay a visit to any other Lodge within the federation. Every Lodge master within the alliance was to be promoted via an election, with no subscription fees to be paid at all to any central authority (though Lodges could still charge local fees). To oversee good behavior, there would be a representative council called the Scottish Directorate that would be formed of people from many difference Lodges. This council would be able to settle any disputes, check any finances, and even authorize the founding of new Lodges. In addition to these changes, there were many other slight alterations to the structure and oversight of the Freemasons.

As it stood, Weishaupt's proposed alliance was designed to alter an issue which many people had with the Freemasons in Germany, in that the ideals the groups supposedly believed in seemed to clash with the organization's practice. Any ideas of equality (a Masonic principle) were seemingly forgotten once members moved past the three traditional ranks. Those in the higher degrees were often only able to pursue their interests and continue along the Masonic path based on their resources. Should a Mason hope to practice alchemy or mysticism, then they would need money to do so. Only by conducting these studies could the Freemasons hope to move into the fourth degrees. To men like Knigge and Weishaupt, this seemed to be a major issue and one which would be combated by the alliance. But the two

men had an alternative intention. As well as solving a seeming crisis within the Freemasons, it would provide the Illuminati with a brilliant recruiting platform. They would be able to spread their Order throughout the ranks of German Freemasonry. It was not long before the edict was agreed upon and circulated around the various Masonic halls. Few people knew of the alliance's true intentions.

Even the announcement that was sent around the Lodges was carefully planned by the Illuminati. The document outlined the faults inherent in the current system, chief among which related to whom the Freemasons were recruiting. As the circular mentioned, many of those people who were admitted into the Freemasons were actually ill-suited to the organization and were only really present thanks to their wealth. This, they felt, was a corruption that was also prone to occur in the wider society. It proved convincing, and soon enough, Weishaupt's proposals were being put into practice.

Having helped draft the changes, the Illuminati themselves were among the first to make changes to their structure. Lodge Theodore – still their headquarters – began to change. As the regulations applied to many of the higher grades of Freemasonry were removed, and each Lodge began to construct their own fourth degrees, the Illuminati followed suit. Establishing themselves as the Grand Lodge in their province, the Illuminati (with Knigge acting on their behalf) wrote a letter that accused the Royal York of decadence. To drive the point home, the Illuminati turned towards one of their old enemies. They accused the Royal York of colluding with and being corrupted by the Jesuits. Strict Observance (or what was left of it) suffered from similar accusations, with the Illuminati claiming that the group was "devoid of all moral virtue." Elsewhere, they accused certain rites of being in league with the Swedes, positioning the Illuminati and their Lodge Theodore as the only true bastion of legitimate Freemasonry. The Illuminati had seen their chance open up before them and they had taken it.

Or so it had seemed. What they had thought to be a devastating number of accusations proved to have the opposite effect. Weishaupt, rather than turning many Freemasons to his cause, had managed to alienate, annoy, and

offend many members. The plan of infiltrating the Freemasons and co-opting their members seemed fundamentally flawed. Other Freemasons such as the Grand Lodge of the Grand Orient of Warsaw (who ran the Freemasons in Lithuania and Poland) might have been interested, but they demanded independence in light of these accusations. They, like many others, were suspicious of the Illuminati's intentions. With many Lodges happy to participate in the first three degrees of Freemasonry, the Illuminati had trouble convincing others of the benefits of joining them in the higher ranks. This was where the true power lay, and other Lodges were happy to keep it for themselves. Nevertheless, the Illuminati had some success. By the beginning of 1783, they had managed to gain full control of seven Masonic Lodges.

It was not that surprising that the attempts of Weishaupt and Knigge were met with relative failure. Though the Lodge Theodore was growing in size, it was still very much a new arrival on the block. Many other Freemason Lodges were much older and thus commanded much more respect. Though the Illuminati had proved lucky in some areas and had managed to capitalize on that, they were guilty of overreaching and attempting to move too far ahead of their means. It was a clumsy approach, one that reflected a lack of awareness of the sentiment towards their Lodge among the Freemasons. What luck they had experienced, they were almost as quick to squander. Furthermore, it helped to ostracize the very members whom the Illuminati wanted to recruit. At this time, they were still very much symbiotically attached to the Freemasons. Not yet strong enough to stand on their own feet, they depended on the older organization as a means of legitimizing themselves in the eyes of potential recruits. Ostensibly, to the outward eye, they were just another Lodge. The truth of the Illuminati was not yet public knowledge. Accordingly, those Freemasons who might agree with the Illuminati's distrust of mysticism and those who did not like the Martinists might be ideal recruits. But they were people who were very much invested in their own independence, something they did not want to give up to the Illuminati. A good example of this was Ditfurth, who despite representing the Illuminati at the Convent of Wilhelmsbad, had been keen to pursue his own agenda and quick to give up.

Ditfurth's own allegiance was quickly removed once he found something more suited to his principles, revealing the difficulty the Illuminati faced. Following the formation of the alliance, there began to emerge a second gathering of Lodges, this time it would be a gather that grouped together the non-mystical Lodges that were around Frankfurt. It was named the Eclectic Alliance and seemed to be ideologically in line with exactly the kind of group the Illuminati was striving toward. The only problem was that it was not their idea. However, the lucky emergence of this Eclectic Alliance provided the opportunity to steady the ship, and after a short discussion, the Illuminati agreed that their Lodges should join. Furthermore, they were welcomed to take seats on the committee and help to draft the statutes and rules for the alliance. They were lucky enough to be trusted with this amount of influence and responsibility, though there seemed to be little tactical advantage that came from the alliance. The agreement did not provide them with that much access to new recruits. In fact, when men such as Ditfurth noticed that the other Lodges in the Eclectic Alliance were more ideologically in line with his own philosophies, he began to distance himself from the Illuminati. He was not alone. Indeed, so successful was the Eclectic Alliance over the Illuminati's federation – and so little control did they have over the group – that it can actually be considered a hindrance to their efforts. All of the subtle planning they had made when trying to place themselves in an opportune moment seemed to be undone.

But the alliance did have one benefit: it kept them in the game. The real luck of the Illuminati seems to have been that they were consistently able to avoid irrelevancy. Time and time again, they hit issues in their plans. Either they were not trusted enough, or they made mistakes, or events did not go as planned. But every time, the group managed to pull through by cleverly seizing on the opportunities that presented themselves. The traditional view of the Illuminati seems to have them pulling the strings behind the world stage, subtly manipulating global events. But in the 18th Century, they struggled to keep a hold of the Freemasons in Bavaria and the surrounding areas. They were lucky enough to be consistently presented with opportunities to redeem themselves and to stay in the game, though were often clever enough to jump on these opportunities in the perfect manner. It was a delicate balancing act between luck, failure, success, and

opportunism. From it all, the Illuminati were steadily becoming more powerful and more influential. As we will see in the next chapter, they were about to get a lot closer to achieving their goals.

The Illuminati Changed the World

Throughout this book, our discussions of the Illuminati have been limited to a small geographical area and have barely covered a decade. In terms of European history, this is only a tiny window into the continent's storied past. Indeed, we have spent much time looking in detail at the Freemasons, another society altogether. Now that we are roughly at the halfway point of the book, you might find yourself asking just how such a famous society was so confined to a brief moment in time. We made a promise at the beginning of this book to examine the facts. There are many myths and legends that exist about the Order, but there can be no doubting their existence. We know what we know because of evidence, the documents (often written by the men named in this book) that have been passed down to our modern age and provide us with definitive evidence of their existence. The Illuminati existed, but how exactly did such a seemingly small group manage to change the world? To answer this question, we should examine the society when they were at their administrative peak.

In the previous chapter, we witnessed the problems that the Illuminati were facing. To expand as a secret society and to put their ideas into practice – to have a demonstrable effect on the world – they would need to grow. In order to grow, they would need to recruit. They had decided that the Freemasons gave them a potential pool of talent, and they had worked to ingratiate themselves into the competing organization, seemingly hoping to take it apart from the inside. But due to poor judgement and poor luck, this had not come to pass. Despite their lofty ambitions, the Illuminati had not quite reached the heights they had strived to attain. But that is not to say that they were not succeeding.

When we look at the recruitment of the Illuminati on a small scale – on a person-to-person basis – it seems clear that they were actually moderately successful. They might have planned to raid the Freemasons for the very best and brightest, displacing the centuries-old society as the dominant clandestine organization, but that was always something of an unrealistic

dream. Instead, their individual level recruitment had provided them with a steadily growing list of members. Not only was the membership growing, but the men coming into the group were of a high quality. People seemed to be keen to believe in the principles laid out by the Illuminati, and it seemed that there was certainly something appealing about how they envisaged the world.

All around them, Bavaria was changing. In the short time since the Illuminati had formed, the ruling party of the country had changed. Charles Theodore – the man who lent his name to the Illuminati's Masonic Lodge – had ascended to power. Charles Theodore had been the man who had originally outlawed secret societies, but his increasing amounts of power had steadily led to a growing liberalism in the region. This was not appreciated by everyone. Though a longstanding ruler of a number of territories, Theodore was not strong-willed enough to drive his ideas forward. Those whose positions seemed to be threatened by a liberalization of the country – members of the court and the clergy – managed to cajole and convince the ruler to reverse his stance. What had seemed like an age of acceptance of liberal ideas was quickly turned around into quite the opposite. Amid growing societal discord, Charles Theodore allowed his powerful and privileged advisors to guard their own positions, at the expense of the region's more progressive thinkers. Across Bavaria, a brief moment of accepted liberalism was dashed by a renewed clamp down on such ideas.

Such a move seemed ideal for the Illuminati. They were founded on the very ideas that Theodore was attempting to repress. Though their Lodge might have been named for the man, the principles of the Illuminati who operated under the guise of Freemasons could not have been further from the ruler's own. Across Bavaria, people were beginning to resent Charles Theodore more and more, especially among the educated (though not necessarily overly-privileged) classes. The situation was ideal for a seemingly enlightened secret society who wanted to recruit new members. With the stated aim of changing the world, the Illuminati began to escalate their recruitment programs.

First to be brought into the group were a number of disaffected Freemasons who had found the growing Martinist influence on the Prudence Lodge to be distasteful. They found in the Lodge Theodore a group who were not nearly as invested in the more esoteric aspects of the Freemason experience and instead focused their attentions on contemporary philosophies and the ideas that were being deemed unlawful by the ruling government. As groups such as this defected to the Illuminati, the Areopagus and Weishaupt realized that they would need somewhere to house their efforts. They chose a mansion of their own, one surrounded by high walls and lush gardens, and one with a library that they could fill with the kind of liberal literature that drove their ideology.

The same kind of expansion was happening across Germany. In many different regions, local Illuminati strongholds were beginning to emerge. Though small at first, they represented a spreading influence that moved across the country in reaction to changing government policies and dissatisfaction with both the ruling elite and the practices of the Freemasons. Attitudes were changing across the region, and the Illuminati had come to represent that change. Numbers were still relatively low, but they were growing well. The circle found in Mainz, for example, had seen its numbers almost double in a short space of time. Where there had previously been around 30 members, there were now 61. The state's views on Catholicism and stated anti-liberal stances only fueled the fire. Similar growth was found in parts of Austria, as well as new branches of the group springing up in places such as Warsaw and Bratislava, and as far away as Milan, Tyrol, and Switzerland. The Illuminati were quickly becoming a European concern, rather than simply a Bavarian group.

By the end of 1784, this seemed to have hit unprecedented heights. Weishaupt, despite his efforts, could not have expected to see the membership grow so smoothly. The accounts and records kept by the group at the time show as many as 650 official members, though the communications and private accounts by Weishaupt and others point towards there having been potentially 2,500 Illuminati members during this period. It is likely that the men were counting the other Freemasons who were members of the Lodges under Illuminati control (though not actual

members at that time), but there is little reason to suspect that the real number did not lie somewhere between the two estimates. For a group that was started in a secretive university meeting, the growth in under a decade was astonishing. It was less about the hard numbers and more to do with the geographical spread of the influence. Twenty powerful and influential members in Milan, for example, were a very valuable resource for a group who saw themselves as a potentially internationally dominant organization. In order to change the world, this level of influence was more important than simple raw numbers.

This was perhaps due to one of the key changes that Knigge and the Areopagus had implemented. While Weishaupt had been content to focus on students and young men, there was a conscious decision to focus on the more influential recruits. This meant that the newest members were typically lawyers, doctors, men of the church, academics, and other professional peoples. These were far more valuable to the organization than students and men of little influence. But even more important were those who could wield true power. Men such as Karl August and Ernest II were both members, as were the Grand Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach and the Duke of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg respectively. Ernest's brother (and the man who would eventually succeed him) August had joined, as had Karl von Dalberg (the governor of Erfurt) and Duke Ferdinand of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel. Duke Ferdinand brought with him Johann Friedrich von Schwarz from his Masonic connections. Count Metternich of Koblenz was also a member. In all these were people with legitimate legislative power, people who could affect real change in the world. In the Illuminati, they happened to see something of real value.

here were even successes in other areas of Europe, recruiting quite influential figures for what was still a relatively small society when considered on the wider international stage. For example, in Vienna, the Illuminati managed to recruit the following people:

- The governor of Galicia (Count Brigido)
- The chancellor of Bohemia (Count Leopold Kolowrat)
- The vice-chancellor of Bohemia (Baron Kressel)

- The chancellor of Hungary (Count Pálffy von Erdöd)
- The governor of Transylvania (and also Grand Master of the local Lodge, Count Banffy)
- The ambassador to London (Count Stadion)
- And the minister of public education (Baron von Swieten)

Even outside of their native regions, the Illuminati were succeeding in recruiting people of real power, those who could not only influence lawmakers and courts, but also those who could further the recruitment. With such an illustrious list of people on their books, it is easy to see why so many ensuing generations have been willing to believe that the Illuminati control vast swathes of legislative power. For a brief period in the 18th Century, they had a very real influence on the part of Central Europe where they were based. Thanks to the works of Knigge, Weishaupt, and many others, there had been a series of real successes in the world of recruitment.

But the Illuminati were not always successful. Despite their laudable attempts to recruit people of real power, they were also marked by a number of notable failures. One of the most famous was their attempt to bring Johann Kaspar Lavater into the fold. Lavater was Swiss, famous for his works in theology and poetry. A well-respected individual, he seemed an ideal fit for the organization and exactly the kind of man they hoped to recruit. But when Knigge offered membership to Lavater, it was summarily rejected. According to the Swiss poet, the Illuminati's stated aims – those of rationalist and humanist principles being enacted in governments across Europe – was not something that could be achieved by a secret society. Not believing in their methods, he declined the invitation. Not only that, but the failure left a lasting impact on Lavater. He let it be known that, in his opinion, such a concerted recruitment drive would eventually be the undoing of the society. As the Illuminati sought out increasingly powerful and influential recruits, the poet believed that this would cause them to forget the ideals and goals that had first inspired them.

Lavater was not alone. Christoph Friedrich Nicolai went further in his investigations into what the Illuminati had to offer. A writer from Berlin, he was another person who seemed to be ideally suited to the ideas the Order

were trying to promote. He went as far as to join up, but it was not long before he became less than convinced by the Order's capabilities. Discussing why he eventually grew disillusioned with the group, he described their aims as "chimeric" and believed that the group were using similar tactics to those used by the Illuminati's old enemies, the Jesuits, something that he believed was dangerous. Though he technically remained a member, he was not very active and was one of the few dissenting voices we have from that time. Not willing to recruit other members and critical of the group's methods, Nicolai was a good indication that not everyone was so seduced by the Illuminati's approach.

At the start of this chapter, we set out to investigate whether the Illuminati managed to change the world. It is one of the most enduring claims levelled against them, though often it relates to an entirely different interpretation of the Illuminati. What we have just seen, the period of history that we have covered, relates to the high water mark of the Illuminati's influence. During this time, they managed to recruit a number of very influential people. They had members in Great Britain, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, and other countries. Not only that, but these were people of real importance. For a society that had been formed less than ten years earlier, this is certainly impressive.

But as we will see in coming chapters, the Illuminati did not manage to turn this success in recruiting into palpable, real-world change. We know that they had a defined ideology, one that promoted the ideas of the Enlightenment and hoped to add a degree of rationalism to governance. But they struggled to even make this change in their local government. They were successful at the time because Bavaria was the exact opposite of what they wanted. Repressive, reactionary, and all too keen to clamp down on liberal ideas, the Illuminati's home playing field was never really affected by their presence. While they did well to recruit important people, they failed to convert that recruitment success into real results. However, though the Illuminati did not manage to affect any real change in 18th Century politics, they certainly left a legacy. As we will see in the next chapter and beyond, however, that legacy was not always entirely positive.

The Illuminati: Satanism, Witchcraft, Rosicrucianism, and the Occult

It might not be a surprise to learn that the Illuminati were not the only secret society competing in 18th Century Europe. We have already encountered the Freemasons and their centuries-old society, one that was known across the continent. But there were other groups as well, similarly outlawed and perceived as being just as dangerous as the Illuminati. When discussing the schism within the Freemasons, we briefly mentioned the rituals and ceremonies that were used by the Masons. While many saw these as simple traditions – and some went as far as to admit that they were invented for the purpose – other secret societies focused far more heavily on the magic, the occult, and the mystical. While the Illuminati were founded on rationalist, seemingly scientific principles, there were other orders that were not nearly as modern. In our modern age, many people have conflated the efforts of such societies with the Illuminati. As such, Weishaupt's order has been accused of everything from Satanism to witchcraft. But were they really involved in such practices? And how did they come to be tarred with the reputation of other secret societies?

While we have been using the phrase "secret society" throughout this book, it has quickly become clear that there were few secrets that were that well-kept in 18th Century Europe. The entire premise of organizations such as the Freemasons and the Illuminati relied upon revealing the secret to others in order to recruit them. This created a strange balance between secrecy and publicity. In essence, many people knew that these groups existed, even if they did not entirely understand them. But alongside the two most famous examples, there was a third major secret society, one which we have not mentioned up until this point. The Rosicrucians, in many ways, seemed to be the antithesis of everything the Illuminati stood for. It was only natural that the two should come into conflict at some stage.

Before we go any further, we should pause to take a moment to learn more about Rosicrucianism. As you might have guessed, the Rosicrucians were a secret society, also founded in Germany. Dating from the medieval period, they were founded by a man named Christian Rosenkreuz, whose name means – quite literally – "rose cross" and lends the society its title. Like many other secret societies, they claimed to possess "esoteric truths" that had been passed down to them from ancient times. Part of their popularity can be traced to two documents that began to circulate around 17th Century

Germany, which presented the Brotherhood of the Rosicrucians as being a laudable Order who hoped to reform mankind. They were opposed to the Roman Catholic religion, in which they were similar to the Illuminati in their quest for a more empirical approach to life. But rather than rationalism, they believed themselves to possess ancient secrets and sciences perfected by Moorish philosophers hundreds of years previous. These seemingly magical and mystical spells and teachings would inform many 18th Century people. They have been named as the place from which Freemasonry borrowed a great deal of ideas for their rituals and ceremonies. This Rosicrucian mysticism, while perhaps not purporting to practice magic as we might understand it today, certainly had a touch of the occult about it. In that respect, they were very much the opposite of the Illuminati's calls for rationalism and modernism.

But the effect of the Rosicrucians on the Freemasons was palpable. Many of their members were intertwined across both orders. It was not uncommon for people to describe themselves as a blend between the two societies. In a similar way to how the Illuminati had infiltrated the Freemasons during the 18th Century, the Rosicrucian Order had managed to do so a century before. By the time Weishaupt first began to think about the Illuminati, the Rosicrucians were already an established presence in the Lodges throughout Germany. Knowing that the two groups would never be able to see eye to eye on many matters, Weishaupt tried very hard to keep the existence of his Illuminati from those who he knew to be Rosicrucians. While the two groups were clearly Protestant in their teachings, the differences ran far deeper. Where the Illuminati were anti-monarchy, the Rosicrucians were in favor of the rule of kings. Where the Illuminati were against the clergy in almost any form, the Rosicrucians believed it had a place in society. Where the Illuminati favored the idea of the Enlightenment-orientated society that was run by people like scientists and philosophers, the Rosicrucians whole-heartedly disagreed.

With two competing secret societies operating within the larger secret society, it was perhaps inevitable that there would be some kind of conflict between the two smaller Orders. One of the factors that proved annoying to various Illuminati members was the Rosicrucian practice of holding séances

and other mystical events. These events were described by various members of the Illuminati as being fraudulent, something that seemed to widen the chasm between the two groups. As more and more people became aware of the existence of the Illuminati, it became increasingly more obvious that the two societies would some come into direct conflict.

But that is not to say that the Illuminati did not have members who leaned towards certain elements of mysticism. Perhaps the most famous was Knigge, who had openly admitted to an interest in practices such as alchemy. His knowledge of the occult had meant that he had been the one trusted with drafting the rituals and ceremonies, seemingly the man who was able to give them an authentic flavor. Increasingly, it seemed, a number of Rosicrucians had been joining the Illuminati, the cross-pollination of the two groups a growing trend. As well as Knigge, Kolowrat was actually a member of the Rosicrucian Order, while many of Knigge's direct recruits certainly had mystic sympathies. Prince Charles of Hesse-Kassel was a confirmed mystic and had, on a number of occasions, voiced his distrust of some of the more ardent Illuminati rationalists.

The first blows in the conflict were launched by Johann Christoph von Wöllner, who led the Prussian branch of the Rosicrucians in a sustained and forceful attack against the Illuminati. Wöllner was known to possess a room dedicated to mysticism. He would take doubting patrons inside and, once locked in, convince them of the effectiveness of the magic that the Rosicrucians were said to possess. The room had been specially engineered exactly for this purpose, and though we do not know exactly how, it has been heavily implied that Wöllner used a series of tricks and illusions to convince patrons who would then become members of the Rosicrucian Orders. Using methods such as these, Wöllner and his Order had managed to gain control of one of the most important Masonic Lodges, the Three Globes, as well as those smaller Lodges that served under it. Wöllner used the Three Globes to launch a flurry of accusations at the Illuminati.

Via the mouthpiece of the Rosicrucian controlled Three Globes Grand Lodge, Wöllner and his Order accused the Illuminati of crimes such as atheism (still very much outlawed at the time) and suggested that they were

plotting revolutionary activities. This was compounded in April of 1783, when Charles of Hesse was informed by fellow Freemason Frederick the Great that the Lodges in Berlin had come into possession of documents that showed that the Illuminati were to be suspected of atheism, being as the documents contained "appalling materials." Frederick the Great sought to get more information from his Illuminati-aligned friend, asking whether he had ever heard of any such things. To make matters worse, Wöllner and his colleagues spread the word around all of the Berlin Lodges that the Illuminati were not to be trusted, as the group hoped to undermine, corrupt, and do away with all sorts of religion. Preying on the conservative members of the Freemasons, they hoped to ward people off the Illuminati for good. The campaign launched by Wöllner and his Rosicrucians went on throughout the remainder of 1783 and well into 1784. By November of that year, they refused even to accept that any Illuminati member could ever describe himself as a Freemason. It was, in effect, a full scale propaganda campaign.

It was not only limited to Lodges in Berlin. In parts of Austria, the Rosicrucians were launching similar campaigns. They described their Illuminati rivals as being responsible for a string of pamphlets that denounced all sorts of religion. This turned into a surveillance mission, with the Rosicrucians placing Illuminati members such as Joseph von Sonnenfels under constant watch, waiting for the slightest slip-up. Their efforts proved to be successful and even managed to completely close down any form of Illuminati recruitment anywhere in Tyrol.

As well as the campaign from outside the Illuminati, those in the Order found themselves undone by betrayals from within. Throughout the Bavarian Illuminati Lodges, the Rosicrucians had been made aware of many of the group's actions thanks to a well-placed (though never named) informant. This was made even worse when one of the Areopagus – a man named Ferdinand Maria Baader – attempted to join the Rosicrucians. Though his initial attempts seemed to be going well, the Rosicrucians were quickly made aware of Baader's position within the Illuminati. He was told, quite bluntly, that he would not be allowed to join both groups. Baader chose to remain loyal to the Illuminati and wrote the customary resignation

letter to the Rosicrucians. In doing so, he boldly claimed that the Rosicrucians possessed no actual mystical knowledge and that they were wrong to ignore those who were “truly illuminated.” While they were brash words, he made the mistake of naming the Lodge Theodore, effectively outing it as the headquarters of the Illuminati. It seemed to be a battle that the Rosicrucians were set to win.

But the Illuminati seemed unable to respond. Why, when a band of mystical Rosicrucians appeared to be waging a fierce campaign against the Illuminati, did they appear to be doing so little? The answer is that they were facing some far greater problems that began to originate from within. Having already peaked in terms of their recruiting and their effectiveness, the Illuminati had now begun to embark upon their decline. Choosing to focus inwards, there was little time to respond to the Rosicrucians. But the conflict between the two Orders provides us with an insight into exactly why the Illuminati are viewed as they are today, and why they have so often been accused of witchcraft, Satanism, and all sorts of mysticism.

First, the very existence of the Rosicrucians demonstrates to the modern audience that secret societies that focused on magic and the occult did in fact exist. These were not works of fiction, created to scare and intimidate. While the Rosicrucians may not really have possessed ancient knowledge and magical powers, people certainly believed that they did. Having existed long before the Illuminati, Orders such as the Rosicrucians helped to create the modern conception of what a secret society might be like; secret, mystical, and conducting strange rituals. Though the Illuminati might have been ideologically opposed to the mystics, it is easy to see why so many people are willing to believe they might be capable of such practices. This is especially true when you remember that the Illuminati themselves conducted many of the rituals they lifted wholesale from the Freemasons (which may in turn have been taken from the Rosicrucians). Simply because they became the better known of the two Orders, the Illuminati have since been burdened with the reputation of the Rosicrucians for conducting all sorts of black magic.

So, while the Illuminati were almost definitively against the kind of mysticism and occult that they might be perceived to have conducted, the existence of the Rosicrucians propaganda campaign shows that they were often targeted for misinformation campaigns. As a secret society, it is not entirely possible to simply establish what you are and are not concerned with. As the rumors and salacious lies began to spread among the Freemasons and even the public, the Illuminati were quickly smeared. Unable to fight back, they fell victim to bad publicity that had endured to the modern day. It does not take long to look around the internet and find discussions that link the Illuminati to devil worship, black magic, and various other occult practices. As we have seen, this could hardly have been further from the truth. While members such as Knigge might have dabbled to some extent, the very founding principles of the Illuminati described them as rational, empirical men. That there should still be so many misconceptions demonstrates just how good a campaign the Rosicrucians waged. But as their reputation was sullied, how could the Illuminati not be fighting back? In the next chapter, we will look into the internal conflicts and destructive tendencies that led to the fall of the Illuminati.

The Illuminati are Dead

If we are to believe the modern stories about the Illuminati, they are very much active and very much alive. Still causing trouble around the world in an unending pursuit of global domination, the Illuminati are behind many of the most important world events we have seen in the last centuries. But that tells a very different story from the history books. In the coming chapters, we will begin to see the schism between the Bavarian Illuminati and the modern idea of the Order as it exists today. In doing so, we will have to answer the question: Are the Illuminati dead? If the answer is yes, then what killed them?

In the previous chapter, we saw how difficult the world could become when the Illuminati faced a threat that was as equally adept at moving within the clandestine circles of secret societies. Though Weishaupt and Knigge had done an incredible job in picking up a small group and raising it to the point where they became a serious concern in many parts of Europe, they had not done so without issues. At various points, both men had fallen out with the council of the Illuminati, the so-called Areopagus. As the Illuminati grew increasingly close to the Freemasons, and as they began to grow outside of Bavaria, this council was deemed to be ineffective. Both Knigge and Weishaupt agreed that it could do with a revamp. Rather than empowering the Areopagus, however, they simply replaced it. Instead, there existed the Council of Provincials, who were hampered by the lack of power.

Though they had replaced the Areopagus with an ineffective substitute, the men who had sat on the Areopagus remained as Illuminati members, and they began to make their voices heard. To this point in time, Knigge had acted as the man who healed up relationships between the Areopagus and Weishaupt. But as soon as Knigge left the immediate scene, the two sides would go back to bickering and arguing. Rather than focusing on external threats or progressing the society, they were content to fight amongst themselves. We still have many of Weishaupt's private letters and communications in which he does not hold back in his distaste of many of

the Areopagites. These letters were written to those who supposedly trusted, often about those who he supposedly considered his enemies. Such was the collusion within the order, however, that Weishaupt was sometimes wrong in his assumptions. Already, cracks were beginning to appear throughout the structure of the Illuminati.

One of the most serious cracks appeared between Weishaupt and Knigge. Though the two had considerably different principles, they had worked together often for the betterment of the society. Weishaupt, however, had succeeded in driving Knigge further and further away from the center of the group, effectively alienating him within the Illuminati. It was an acknowledged fact that the founder of the Illuminati had been forced to cede a huge amount of control and power to Knigge, and he had never truly forgotten this. Weishaupt wanted his power back. Though Knigge had been trusted as the only man who had been able to construct and create the rituals of the Illuminati – essential to give them the appearance of a credible secret society like the Freemasons – Weishaupt was clearly resentful of what he had lost in the trade. Knigge deserved a huge amount of credit for what he had accomplished, however. Before he had become a member, Weishaupt and his fellow Illuminati (the majority of whom were his students) were limited in their scope and their abilities, if not their ambitions. Once Knigge had been entrusted with the recruitment and the creation of many of the society's internal documents, they had almost instantly begun to grow. Knigge had elevated the Illuminati to the point where a somewhat small and fringe group held an international presence and was considered dangerous enough to be attacked by other, more powerful, secret societies.

For his part, Knigge felt that the hard work he had put into the Illuminati was not being acknowledged. Feeling as though he was underappreciated by the founder of the group, the divisions between the two men's beliefs began to become more of an issue. One of the key issues proved to be Weishaupt's continued stance on clericalism and his absolute abhorrence of the way in which religion was organized and practiced. Knigge perceived this as clashing with his own beliefs in the mystical arts. When Knigge began to recruit more and more people who shared his beliefs – men such as Ditfurth – Weishaupt began to see this as a threat to the founding

principles of the Illuminati and an attempt to change the course of the society.

The tension between the two finally erupted during ongoing talks regarding some of Knigge's work. The matter at hand was the grade of Priest, one of the fourth-tier degrees that awaited those who rose through the ranks of the Illuminati. Knigge had been entrusted with writing the materials for the degree and tasked with making them sound suitably mystical so that future members might believe them to be authentic. Not necessarily that they were working, but rather that the new recruits were entering into a centuries-old tradition. Many of the Illuminati of the higher ranks considered the work that Knigge had done to not be his best. It had been described as "florid" by some and "ill-conceived" by others. At its worst, some of the members felt, the ritual made use of "puerile and expensive" regalia. This meant that some of the Illuminati would outright refuse to use Knigge's work, while others only did so after editing it. Things truly became serious when Weishaupt demanded that it be re-written and that Knigge face the critics.

This was not something Knigge wanted to hear. Having already completed the work, he argued that it had been distributed to the Lodges a long time ago. Hence, the people who had heard the rituals had been under the impression that it was ancient. Furthermore, he had done this with Weishaupt's blessing as had been laid out in the original instructions. If the rituals and ceremonies were edited now, then it would appear deeply suspicious and would contravene the blessing Weishaupt had provided some years earlier. Weishaupt did not care. He began to have loud discussions with other Illuminati members about the Priest rituals, describing how they were fundamentally flawed and how Knigge had simply invented it all. Weishaupt was allowing his lack of mystical beliefs to show.

To Knigge, this was deeply insulting. Having heard what Weishaupt was doing, he went straight to the founder and threatened to reveal just how much of the Illuminati's ritual and practice he had simply invented. If everyone found out that it had all been simply concocted by Knigge, then there would be a serious blow to the trust placed in the Illuminati by its

recruits. They had all joined up under the impression that the entire thing was genuine, not just the inventions of Knigge. But the two men failed to come to an agreement and tensions between the two continued to simmer and bubble.

As a means of fighting back, Knigge attempted to convene another council, trying to put together a convention of the Areopagites who had provided some counterbalance to Weishaupt's whims. But it proved more difficult to carry out than he had imagined, and the group failed to materialize. It soon became clear that many members of the Areopagus trusted Knigge even less than the founder of the Illuminati with whom he was fighting. As it became clear that he was losing a battle for the hearts and minds of the Illuminati members, Knigge finally bowed out of the fight with Weishaupt and – in July of 1784 – tended his resignation. He left the council by mutual agreement, handing back to them all of the papers and materials that he had used during his time carrying out their wishes. As a response, Weishaupt went out and wrote a retraction, taking back all of the slanders and accusations that he had levelled against Knigge during their falling out. Though it had appeared that he had won the war against Knigge, Weishaupt had only succeeded in robbing the Illuminati of one of its most important members. Much in line with the notion of "cutting off your nose to spite your face," Weishaupt had allowed his petty squabbles to undermine and fracture the Illuminati. Not only had the arguments and disagreements been disruptive, but Knigge's exit meant that the Illuminati had now lost the man who was considered the best recruiter, the best theoretician, and the man who provided them with a bridge to the influence they truly craved. Weishaupt had sounded the death knell of the Illuminati, and he had no idea.

If the differences between Weishaupt and Knigge had signaled the beginning of the end of the Illuminati, then the ripples were felt through every level of the organization. With such clear disputes and differences at the highest levels, it should not have been a surprise to see the lower-ranked Illuminati members taking their cues from those above them. With the Rosicrucians doing their best to damage the Illuminati name, the government increasingly suspicious of liberal-minded secret societies, and

the upper echelons arguing among themselves, there was no one around to notice the cracks that were starting to appear in the society.

One of the biggest issues was trying to remain secretive. Though recruitment was essential for the growth of any secret society, there was a decorum and a method behind the attempt to bring additional people in on the secret. The majority of the recruitment – especially as it was handled by Knigge – occurred in smoky rooms, hidden places where people would not be overheard. Furthermore, only those who were considered genuine Illuminati prospects were told about the potential existence of the anti-monarchy, anti-clericalism society. But that was not how many of the lower-ranked Illuminati members were conducting themselves. Despite the secretive nature of their society, there was a great deal of loose talk emanating from many members. This could come in many forms. They might be drunken boasts of secret power made in Bavarian bars, or they might have been a stinging criticism of the monarchy launched in a place where such outlandish principles were never heard. Over dinner parties, Illuminati members hinted about their secret organization's plans to take down the structures of society, to the point where their existence became common knowledge amongst people who had little or nothing to do with secret societies.

Perhaps more worryingly was that these loose lips would often give away the names of those involved. With the principles behind the Illuminati often seeming very threatening against those in power, the protection provided to the group members came in the form of their secret nature. As long as no one knew that you were a member of the radical organization, you were likely safe. But as the information began to leak out of the increasingly loquacious Illuminati members, even this veil of protection was lifted. Soon, the names of the highest ranking members began to circulate among the Bavarian society. For those who held onto powerful and influential government positions, this could be a real problem. As the tide of public opinion was turning against this little understood, clandestine threat, those whose names were linked to the Illuminati (rightly or wrongly) found their positions and their lives coming under growing scrutiny.

By this point in time, Knigge's recruitment tactics had succeeded in filling the Illuminati ranks with people from a wide range of civic and governmental positions. Though Knigge himself had walked away from the group, he left behind a legacy of increased influence. It seemed as though the Illuminati were slowly infiltrating the ranks of government. Though they might not have the people in the highest positions among their number, they were more than stocked with the men who carried out the legislative legwork. Should these men be promoted or rewarded with additional power over time, then the Illuminati would feel their influence grow. Just as they had done with the Freemasons, the plan seemed to be to infiltrate and guide a much larger host body while striving to remain in the shadows.

Indeed, the Illuminati had been so successful at this that there was a period when one's relationship with the Illuminati could have a big influence over interactions with the government. Take, for example, the idea of a legal dispute that might need to be settled in court. With the increased Illuminati presence on the judiciary, you would stand a far greater chance of a favorable result if you were in good standing with the Order. Whether it was judges, lawyers, or simply people who could apply influence, the Illuminati had the members who could provide real assistance in these sort of circumstances, or could deliver real misfortune if their opinion of you was not quite so favorable.

It was this growing level of influence that was gradually noticed by the general populace and steadily resented more and move. The rumors of the Illuminati's powers and influence grew and spread, far exceeding their actual capabilities. While the Order itself was facing major issues on the inside, unable to agree on their direction, the public and the government only saw the looming specter of a very real threat. Unable to see the whole picture, they seemed to vastly overestimate the potential of the Illuminati, adding to the fear and worry that the Order was provoking. Even little things began to get blamed on the Illuminati. When a number of anti-religious leaflets were distributed across Bavaria, the Illuminati were the ones who got the blame. Regardless of whether or not they created the pamphlets (we're not unsure), the fact that so many people were willing to presume this to be true is a key moment in the history of the Illuminati. It

marks the moment when they began to take on the role of an urban legend, the unseen bogey man who could be blamed for society's ills. While one version of the Illuminati was busy dying, the other, more modern version was getting ready to rise up in their place.

That is not to say, however, that the public were wrong in their presumptions. While there were clear motivations on behalf of the Illuminati's rivals to discredit and dissolve the Order, these vindictive actions were often based at least partly on some element of the truth. The reason, for example, that so many people were willing to believe that the Illuminati might have distributed the anti-religious pamphlets is because this was perfectly in line with many of the ideas the Illuminati wanted to promote. Even if they had not made the pamphlets themselves, the Illuminati likely did not disagree too strongly with the content. Indeed, such was their influence in the government that it was almost an open secret that the Illuminati's influence in the courts could provide people with preferential treatment. The elected treasurer in Bavaria was a good example, with his position being confirmed by two men who stood on the Ecclesiastical Council, who made a lot of noise to ensure the appointment. All three were Illuminati men. Similarly, the Illuminati campaign against the Jesuits had always rumbled on. As their influence increased, a number of notable Jesuit institutions had been outlawed and banned, with the Jesuits themselves losing their grip on a number of academic institutions and positions within the Church. In the University of Ingolstadt, the once Jesuit-dominated teaching positions were put under pressure, with Illuminati members taking their place. It was almost inevitable that this level of influence would eventually result in jealousy and distrust among not only the Illuminati's rivals, but those who did not align with their beliefs.

To the public, it seemed as though the Illuminati were taking over the country. As we have seen, behind the scenes, things were far from perfect. But thanks to the nature of the secret society, only the tip of the iceberg was visible to the general public. While the visible elements of the Illuminati seemed to be a genuine concern, the members themselves were often arguing and in disagreement over what they should be doing in their pursuit of power. Such was the discord among the public that the authorities finally

began to take notice of the growing Illuminati problem. The issue arrived at the feet of Karl Theodore, the person in charge of Bavaria. Facing increasing amounts of pressure, he was forced into actions.

His first move was to reinforce the ban on all of the secret societies. Though this had already been in place, the very existence of three difference groups (the Illuminati, the Freemasons, and the Rosicrucians, as well as many others) demonstrates that it was not rigorously enforced. As the tide of public opinion turned against the Illuminati, the order was given to clamp down on such groups, with special attention paid to the Illuminati. It was considered by some historians to be a "deathblow" to the Illuminati, with the Order unable to cope with the increased amount of attention and scrutiny that the government was placing on them. An edict, issued by the government and dated to the 2nd of March, 1785, made it clear that the Illuminati were specifically considered illegal.

The leading members within the Order could see quite clearly that they were not wanted. Though Bavaria had been their base of operations and the area from which they had risen up to their current position, many of the highest-ranking Illuminati men decided to flee. Weishaupt was one of the first, taking with him all of the documents, internal communications, letters, correspondence, and anything else he possessed that related to the secret society. However, these were seized in a number of operations between 1786 and 1787, and then they were published by the government in the same year. It provided a huge amount of insight into the formation of the Illuminati and can demonstrate to us the rise and fall of the Order as seen through its founder. But Weishaupt was not alone. A similar fate befell Von Zwack, who had his home raided and his documents seized. These were also published. Eventually, enough materials were gathered as to provide a good indication of exactly how the Illuminati had come into being.

The publishing of the internal communications can be read as the final death of the Illuminati. Though other events – Knigge leaving, the government edict – certainly signaled the end, it was the publishing of these materials that signaled the transition from secret society to strange relic of the past. The Illuminati's defining characteristic that they were a shadowy,

secretive order was ripped away from them. The edifice of their abilities was torn down and the truth about their organization was made available for all to see. As well as making the communications visible for all to see, the publication had the effect of revealing many of the men who counted themselves as members of the Illuminati. Ferdinand of Brunswick was one such powerful figure, while Von Zwack was an important diplomat at the time as well as being the second in command of the Illuminati. In addition, even famed artists and writers were implicated, including Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the rulers of Gotha and Weimar, and Johann Gottfried Herder. It was more than enough to cause a scandal in Bavaria.

As the leaders of the organization fled the scene and the authorities systematically took apart the structure of the Illuminati, very little was left behind. Such was the perceived threat to the authorities that no stone was left unturned in the pursuit of the Order. Accordingly, the move essentially finished the Illuminati as a functioning, ambitious secret society. Though there might have been pockets of men who held out in the face of the Bavarians attempts to destroy the group, they were robbed of their ability to do very much at all. Groups such as the Freemasons began to look inwards and consider how the Illuminati had so easily infiltrated their Lodges. The governments began to scrutinize each and every influential position to a far greater level. Even though the Illuminati had succeeded in very little, their ability to rise up and become a threatening force in roughly a decade served as a wakeup call to those in power. While the Illuminati had died, their influence lived on.

But the real legacy of the Illuminati was much more difficult to grasp. Though the physical structures of the organization had been dismantled and all of their major players had fled, the name of the Illuminati lived on. Not only did it become famous in 18th Century Bavaria, but even today many people know the name. Ask anyone about a secret society and chances are the Illuminati will be one of the first names they mention. While the actual organization itself had died, the ghost of the Illuminati live on. In the next chapter, we will discuss how the ghost of such an organization could become such an influential and powerful name throughout the 18th, 19th, 20th, and even the 21st centuries.

The Illuminati Caused the French Revolution

After the fall of the Illuminati, the name lived on. Despite Weishaupt and his cohorts being forced to flee the scene and the entire organization being taken apart by the authorities, their reputation was such that they could easily be blamed for some of the more important events that were taking place around the world at this time. Locally, in Bavaria, many people were quick to attribute events that were slightly out of the ordinary on the Illuminati. Rulings in a court or changes in state policy would be accompanied by mutterings that perhaps some secret society was behind everything. As the disgraced organization that had been chased out of the country, the Illuminati were the logical choice on which to pin any kind of blame.

This is something which has continued to the modern day. Nowadays, there is a tendency to ascribe motivations to the most random of events. The rise of the conspiracy theorist has provided a subculture that questions every

aspect of any event around the world. From the Moon landing to the events of September the 11th, 2001, there is always an alternative explanation. Typically, these involve shadowy conspiracies lurking in the background. In most circumstances, the name 'Illuminati' is well known enough to provide a suitable title for such a conspiracy. Even though we know the Bavarian Illuminati of Weishaupt is dead and gone, the name exists as a kind of go-to title for any makeshift conspiracy.

But this is not a new phenomenon. Shortly after the death of the Illuminati organization in Bavaria, events in France would have a huge impact on the world. The French Revolution was one of the single most important manifestations in Western history, leaving a legacy that can be said to include the rise of Napoleon, the First and Second World Wars, the Cold War, and everything we experience in our society today. In many ways, the slogan of "liberté, égalité, fraternité" came to embody the ideals that would drive the history of the next two centuries. In no short time at all, people noticed that the aims of the French Revolution were remarkably similar to the goals of the Illuminati and men like Weishaupt. It was barely any time at all before people were beginning to suggest that the Illuminati might have been responsible for events in France. But how did the organization come to be blamed for such a major moment in history?

The dates given for the French Revolution are typically between 1789 and 1799. During this period, civil unrest in France manifested itself in such a way as to encourage the people of France to rise up against the established order and overthrow the ruling aristocracy. The monarchy was dismantled, a French Republic established, and the groundwork eventually laid for a man named Napoleon to rise up and seize power. All of this was done under the banner of Enlightenment ideals. The liberal, somewhat radical views of men like Voltaire, combined with years of bad harvests, heavy taxation, and resentment of the clergy and aristocracy, led to an unprecedented uprising that shook the pillars of the European ruling classes. Built on Enlightenment ideas, it is possible to look at the views and opinions of Weishaupt and quietly assume the French Revolution must have been entirely to his liking.

This is exactly what seemed to have crossed the minds of a number of writers in Europe. In fact, two significant texts were published that suggested the Illuminati had not gone away. Instead, they had only appeared to do so and were, in fact, responsible for many world changing events, such as those seen in France. The books were *Proofs of a Conspiracy*, which was written by John Robison, and Augustin Barruel's book, titled *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, published in 1798 and 1797 respectively. Though it's clear from the title alone that Robinson's book is hard at work in establishing a secret organization, Barruel's work functioned along very similar lines. Hardly a decade after the fall of the Illuminati, their name was essentially fair game to anyone who wanted to suggest the existence of a dangerous secret society. As the word Illuminati still carried some cultural cache, but the publication of the books were distant enough from the actual events, the authors were pretty much free to say whatever they pleased about the supposedly survival of the Illuminati.

Across both works, there is a conviction that the Illuminati never died. Ignoring the evidence of men such as Weishaupt and the events leading up to the disbanding of the organization, the two authors follow very similar paths in detailing the secret society. Both seem in agreement that the Illuminati simply withdrew from the public eye. Already a secret society, they seem to suggest that the Illuminati became a very secret society. From this positions way back in the shadows, the authors suggest that the group could organize events such as the French Revolution.

That both of the books sold well demonstrates the need people have to explain events in a simple, reductionist manner. Hundreds, possibly thousands of books have been written on the causes of the French Revolution. Historians and academics have long argued over what caused the uprising, providing Marxist readings of events, Psychoanalytic interpretations, and economic reasons why a group of disenfranchised people should fight against their overlords. But while modern historiography is more than capable of providing detailed reasoning behind events, it is a great deal easier to simply suggest that the Illuminati were behind everything. As the works of Robison and Barruel grew increasingly popular and the books were reprinted again and again, we can see for the

first time how quickly people choose to accept the countercultural (and often easy) explanation rather than examining anything in great detail.

The two books inspired a wave of conspiracy related literature. For a while, many events were being blamed on the Illuminati, as well as other secret societies whose names have often been forgotten. As the French Revolution left a massive cultural impact on the Western world, there was an attempt to explain everything with a simple truth. Rather than believing that history could be a complex web of competing motivations and human emotions, the idea that a clandestine organization was in fact pulling the strings served to reduce everything to a very simple (though perhaps not desirable) explanation. It also had the effect of restoring order to a chaotic world. For those reading conspiracy literature at the time, the idea of events like the French Revolution occurring all over the world might seem worrisome. The French Revolution destroyed the working order, the established way of life. For those who were doing well for themselves, this kind of chaos was a threat. Having a shadowy group secretly pulling the strings applied a kind of rationale and order to the randomness of the French Revolution. Though they might not have agreed with the Illuminati's actions, there was some comfort to be found in the knowledge that someone, somewhere held the reins to this furious beast. In that respect, the idea of the Illuminati became much more important than the living organization had ever been.

But there were people at the time who were more than happy to dispel notions of a giant conspiracy across Europe. Some people happily bought into the idea and men such as Reverend Seth Payson wrote books like *Proofs of the Real Existence, and Dangerous Tendency, Of Illuminism* which purposefully described an Illuminati conspiracy. But the problem was, Payson and his like had no evidence. While they might have suggested that the Illuminati existed, there was little they could offer to back up their statements. This provided ample fodder for men like Jean-Joseph Mounier, who wrote a book titled *On the Influence Attributed to Philosophers, Free-Masons, and to the Illuminati on the Revolution of France*. Inside, he provided criticism of the ideas of the Illuminati conspiracy and was more than happy to dissuade people from this belief.

But such was the popularity of the idea that men like Barruel and Robison were able to make a large amount of money from the premise of a global conspiracy. They were able to travel to the newly formed country of America and give lectures and talks on how the Illuminati were influencing events. Much like Payson, they rarely had little in the way of definitive evidence. But it seemed not to matter. They were well paid for their writing and well paid for their work. They managed to influence others and, gradually, people like Jedidiah Morse (a priest) began to use the material as the foundation of his own ideas. These ideas were also printed, circulated, and built upon. Slowly, an entire genre of conspiratorial, speculative non-fiction began to spread across the world. At the heart of it all was the idea that groups such as the nominally defunct Illuminati were actually controlling global events.

But many of the salient facts got lost along the way. Much like a children's parlor game, in which a sentence is whispered into a series of ears until it metamorphoses into something entirely different, this idea of the Illuminati moved further and further away from the truth. While the initial books had succeeded in outlining the similarities between the principles of the French Revolution and the principles of the Illuminati, the derivative work became increasingly tenuous. Soon, the ideological foundations of such conspiracies vanished. In their stead was the modern interpretation of the Illuminati we see before us today. Rather than the liberal, radical group who sought to overthrow the monarchy and the church, the modern version of the Illuminati has become so twisted that these ideals are never mentioned. Instead, the Illuminati are a ruling elite, or focused on enslaving humanity, or hoping to use Israel to topple the world, or they are behind the global banking crises. With very little effort, it is possible to find someone who has attributed almost any political event from the last century to the work of the Illuminati.

So while the Illuminati in no way were responsible for the French Revolution, the possibility that they might have guided events has become one of the most important moments in the organization's history. These days, the ghost of the Illuminati is an entirely different beast. As we will see in the final chapter, the modern Illuminati can be traced back to the

conspiracy theories that plagued the French Revolution. Soon enough, we'll find the final truth behind the Illuminati myth.

The Illuminati in Modern Society

These days, the word "Illuminati" is basically a brand name. Utterly divorced from the secret society origins that rose up in Bavaria in the 18th Century, the group have been co-opted by everyone from college fraternities to fiction writers, from internet conspiracy theorists to video game creators. Through all of these iterations, the true history of the organization is often lost, forgotten, or simply ignored completely. If we want to question the idea of the Illuminati in the modern day, then we need to understand that the meaning of the word is entirely different. While we have looked in depth at the Bavarian origins of the Illuminati, this understanding shows us just how separate from the truth the contemporary uses of the group have become.

It is not uncommon to see the Illuminati inspire those who are looking to set up their own secret society. Having become the default title for any kind of shadowy organization, many organizations that are keen to emphasize their own importance will take the Illuminati as a starting point. Whether this means adding some variation of the name – the Illuminated, Illumination, Illuminate, and so on – or even borrowing some of the Order's iconography – the Minerval owl, for example – there are many examples of people who hope to give their own group credibility by invoking the Illuminati. These might be Masonic sects, college fraternities, or just curious people getting together to meet in private. All of them are aware, at least on some level, of what the name Illuminati means. They are very rarely aware, however, of what the Order stood for.

In a similar vein, there are many works of fiction that choose to use the Illuminati as a plot device. Established fiction authors such as Dan Brown (author of the *Da Vinci Code* and *Angels and Demons*) and Umberto Eco (*Foucault's Pendulum*) have both sold a great many novels while featuring characters who were in some way related to the Illuminati. Across everything from children's books, to movies, to video games, the Illuminati can be a very useful plot device. Thanks to their reputation, they spark a

kind of instant familiarity, especially useful as the authors can adjust the group's motivations depending on the particular story. These days, many people's first exposure to the word 'Illuminati' will come from works of fiction such as these, created by writers whose research can vary from the incredibly in-depth to the casual and cursory. With so many different forms of media depicting the Illuminati, the ghost of the Bavarian secret society has taken on a new life as a recurring organization in fiction, much like the United Nations or NASA.

The prevalence of the Illuminati across many forms of fiction can often form the starting point for people's understanding of the group, but it is very rarely the ending point. Once people hear the name, they often have their interests piqued and become curious about what the group is about. Inevitably, they will take to the internet. Simply typing the word "Illuminati" into a search engine will provide the user with 25,000,000 results. On twenty-five million webpages, all across the internet, someone has mentioned the Illuminati. Giving a quick glance down the first page of results, the authenticity of the research quickly becomes questionable. Very soon, the questions move away from historical and verifiable facts and towards questions of whether the Illuminati control the music industry, of whether they influence celebrities, or whether their logo is featured on American currency. Such matters are as entirely divorced from the original Illuminati as to be something else entirely.

Take, for example, the myth that the Illuminati feature on the one dollar bill of the United States of America. According to the legend, the following can be found on the note:

- The Illuminated eye floating atop the pyramid, which is said to represent Lucifer the Great Architect. The eye was never a symbol of the Illuminati, and their relation to the occult and the mystical was inconsistent at best, far from their reputation as devil worshipers.
- The pyramid features 13 layers of bricks, which represent the original 13 colonies of America and 72 bricks to represent the 72 powers of the Kabbalistic name of God. The Illuminati had no presence in America, certainly not during the founding of the country, and any

kind of belief in Jewish mysticism can be considered ridiculous, as Jews were barred from joining.

- The date MDCCLXXVI, which represents the day the Illuminati were formed – ignoring the auspicious nature of that date in term of American history, the Illuminati name was not invented for an additional two years.
- The prevalence of the number 13, connected to paganism and power over the thirteen colonies – paganism was at odds with the rational nature of the Illuminati mindset.

There are many more websites that claim that almost every aspect of the one dollar bill (and others) hints at the Illuminati and how they secretly control America. Conspiracy theories such as this are not only the most common use of the word Illuminati in the modern age, but they represent an ill-informed and often purposefully ignorant interpretation of the history of the Order. Even the most cursory research can eliminate the minor details and suggestions put forward by these websites. What's more, few of the theorists are able to answer the question as to why a secret society would declare their existence on one of the most common items in the country. If the Illuminati wanted to keep their existence a secret, then it is unlikely that they would advertise on the country's currency. Furthermore, if they did indeed leave coded messages, their codes could likely stand up to a greater amount of scrutiny that making vague associations.

Instead, these websites perform the essential modern function of the Illuminati in our culture. The millions of sites that claim to possess knowledge of the conspiratorial trends of a modern Illuminati simply trade

on the famous nature of the name in return for attention. It can help to think of the usage of the name like a franchise. Just like with a fast food chain, a person takes the name and puts it above their door. The name carries certain connotations for the viewer, who knows what they can expect when they go inside. Just as a fast food customer can expect the same kind of burgers across the country, those who wander into the more dubious areas of the internet which fix the word Illuminati above their door know what to expect. And just like in fast food restaurants, the people cooking the food are entirely different. While it might be the same name above the door, the people inside are far from the original workers. Today, the Illuminati name carries a certain cultural meaning but very little else.

So why does the name remain important? As well as the fascination some people have with the idea of conspiracy theories, one of the most important explanations for the popularity of the Illuminati is simple. Money. By putting the word Illuminati in the title of a book, one can expect to sell more copies. Put the organization into a film or video game and people will know what to expect. Mention it on the internet and people will eventually arrive at your site. Rather than a global conspiracy, the popularity of the Illuminati in the modern age can typically be attributed to cold, hard cash.

It is telling that men such as Mark Dice or David Icke are able to trade so freely on the Illuminati name. Often paying very little attention to the organization's Bavarian origins, they play on the modern conception of the Order. There is a huge amount of money to be made from people's inquisitive natures. The audience wants to know the secret, the solution, the key to how everything works. While the real answers to these questions are often infinitesimally correct, packaging up a simple answer can be immensely profitable. By claiming that the Illuminati are some modern global puppet masters, it is possible to provide an alternative explanation that is ever so slightly plausible, much easier to comprehend, and almost impossible to prove right or wrong. Just as the Illuminati have become a brand name for bland conspiracy theories, they have become a profitable venture. Read almost any text on the subject and there will be little mention of the original Enlightenment ideals behind the group, or the discussions between Knigge and Weishaupt. Instead, discussion drifts to celebrity

encounters, half-hearted iconographic explanations, and thorough misinterpretations of actual history. Evidence is ignored, and in its place is a titillating, tempting alternative. A truth that could be true, but that will never be proved. Today, the Illuminati are dead and gone. In their place, a modern ghost of the Order has risen up and become a profitable, entertaining option for anyone who wants to believe in the possibility of a conspiracy.

Conclusion

Many people will pick up a book on the Illuminati with the hope that it will explain any number of conspiracy theories. Did they assassinate JFK? Did they organize the Bolshevik revolution? Were they behind any number of terrorist attacks, horrible accidents, and other world changing events? The answer is almost invariably "no." In this book, we have attempted to explain why.

There exists two very different versions of the Illuminati. The is the factual version, the secret society that was founded in 18th Century Bavaria, that has left a legacy of evidence, materials, and historical provable facts. And there is the fiction, the ensuing interpretation of the Illuminati that makes them both everything and nothing. They are simultaneously responsible for the greatest conspiracy every put into practice, while clandestine enough to leave no evidence whatsoever. The modern version is a ghost story, built from the blocks of the historical Order than crumbled under its own failings.

The real Illuminati was an ambitious, radical, and liberal organization. It was eventually torn apart by very human failings and the age-old inability of individuals to reach a consensus. It's possible to see very normal, sympathetic traits in the history of the Bavarian Illuminati. But the modern version provides us with an equal insight into the human condition. The Illuminati as we know them today offer answers in a world full of questions. They offer some semblance of explanation when the facts desert us. For those who believe in their actions, the Illuminati become a way to explain the inexplicable. While this does not make the stories true, it at least explains why the Illuminati continue to exist and will carry on existing for the foreseeable future.

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Volume 6

SKULL AND BONES

AMERICA'S MOST POWERFUL AND MYSTERIOUS SECRET SOCIETY

CONRAD BAUER

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Introduction

Nobody likes the idea that there are hugely influential powers operating behind closed doors. For centuries, there have been stories about secret societies that control everything we do and dominate the highest echelons of politics and business. Whether it's the Illuminati, the Masons, or the Knights Templar, it's not uncommon for people to believe that there might be a cabal of people who conspire together for their own nefarious purposes. But while these earlier societies might be clouded in mystery and intrigue, there are modern equivalents of which we know much, much more.

One of these mysterious societies is known simply as Skull and Bones. A clandestine group who gather at one of the world's top universities, they are made up of some of the cleverest, brightest, and most privileged members of their generation. In addition to this, their members have gone on to be CEOs, moguls, and even Presidents. Their alumni hold some of the most important positions within society, and for the majority, their membership of this secret club is a closely guarded secret.

Whether it's generations of the Bush family, members of the Taft family, Rockefellers, CIA officers, Presidents, publishers, judges, lawyers, Olympians, ambassadors, congressmen, governors, senators, authors, diplomats, or musicians, there seems no limit on who might be a members. With their suggested involvement in thefts, rituals, and even more hidden power politics, the members of Skull and Bones are part of one of the seemingly most powerful groups in the world. In this book we will examine their history, their practices, their members, and their legacy. By the end, you should have a much clearer idea of what it means to be a member of one of Yale's most exclusive groups: Skull and Bones.

A Brief History of the Order of the Skull and Bones

The history of Skull and Bones might seem simple, but as with many secret societies, attempting to untangle the web of stories, myths, and legends can be incredibly difficult. As such, it is perhaps best to start with a brief overview in which we can examine the commonly accepted narrative, before plunging into greater depth. The theories relating to the history of Skull and Bones are almost as old as the group itself, ensuring that whenever research into the society's history is attempted, one must navigate the murky waters. The society itself has no reason why it should attempt to clarify any part of its history. For them, a murky, confused narrative filled with mistruths simply adds to the aura of the group and distracts from the more truthful elements of what we think we know. By keeping their history conspicuously obscure, Skull and Bones becomes even more of a vague concept. If we want to establish the accepted truth behind the group's history, it can help to turn to an article from Time magazine published in 2009.

As stated in the article in Time magazine, Skull and Bones and its members have been blamed for everything from the Kennedy assassination to the invention of the atomic bomb. The society has been portrayed in negative and positive lights in all sorts of media and has even made an appearance being satirized on the Simpsons. Their involvement in a number of high profile court cases and crimes has bought the group to unexpected levels of attention, prompting a surge in interest. As a response to this, people have tried to assemble as much information as possible on the group. One of the best examples of the group's influence is the election for President of the United States of America that took place in 2004. The election was held between George W. Bush, Republican, and John Kerry, Democrat. As chance would have it, both men were graduates of Yale, and both had been inducted into the secret society. Whichever man ended up taking the White House, America was guaranteed to be overseen by a Bonesman (the name

given to the group's members.) Later in this book, we will look into this event in even greater detail.

William Russell

Skull and Bones, as the legends go, was founded by a man named William Russell. Russell, a student at Yale, class of 1833, spent a year in Germany. He found himself wandering between the clandestine and mystical organizations that one might have encountered in 19th Century European high society. These mysterious clubs organized by the elite and the aristocracy would often imitate and replicate legendary organizations such as the Illuminati and the Priory of Scion. Fascinated and enthralled by such a society, Russell took what he had learned from the secretive Germans and brought it back with him to the academic environment of one of America's oldest educational institutions, Yale University. After a supposed falling out between a number of debating societies at the university – Brothers in Unity, the Calliopean Society, and Linonia – who had been arguing about the Phi Beta Kappa ceremony for dishing out the awards, Russell decided that the American institution needed to take the lead from the Germans he had encountered. Teaming with a man named Alphonso Taft, in 1832 the pair founded a group they named as the "Order of the Skull and Bones."

It was not long before the group began to establish its own mythology. The process of inviting someone into the society was in the fashion of similar American university groups. It involved a person being "tapped." This recruitment process was conducted, and with great foresight, Russell managed to foster a spirit of mysterious elitism. Take, for example, the first recruit for the so-called Brotherhood of Death. Alphonso Taft was set to hold an important role in American history, if only for being the father of William H. Taft, the future President of the United States. As the group's first charters indicate, the original name was the "Order of the Scull and Bones," though this common alternative spelling was later corrected.

One of the first legends that was passed down about the activities of the members of Skull and Bones was that they were involved in pagan worship.

There were rumors that the group devoted themselves to the goddess Eulogia, an invented creation who was said to represent eloquence. In addition to this, the name was supposed to represent the Order's worship of pirates and other criminals, while they hatched dastardly plans in which world domination was always the end goal. Right from the start, there was an element of the conspiracy theory about what really went on behind the doors of Russell's secret society.

The Russell Trust Association

In recognition of the group's founder, the assets of Skull and Bones are now managed by what is known as the Russell Trust Association. Founded in 1856, the group had been operating for nearly two decades before it was decided that the trust would be required. By this point, the original members had long since graduated, but that did not stop them from taking an active interest. The group ensured that each and every year, a fresh wave of inductees would be tapped, chosen for their reputations on campus and their reputations in the wider world. The Russell Trust Association, founded by both Russell and another Bonesman, Daniel Coit Gilman, was created to ensure that the group's members had a network that existed after their graduation. It would be one in which they could monitor, nurture, and preserve the group from outside the confines of the university system. Gilman himself would prove to be an important man, eventually becoming president of both John Hopkins University and the University of California. He was also one of the founders of the Carnegie Institution. He was perfectly placed to oversee one of the country's most important academic societies.

Looking through the records, one of the first appearances or acknowledgements of the existence of the Skull and Bones outside of their own members can be found in a book by Lyman Bagg. *Four Years at Yale*, published in 1871, tells the story of Bagg's own experiences at the university. While not a member of S&B, and not aware of many of the group's internal machinations, the account demonstrates that in the fifty years following the founding of the group, their reputation and mystery had

become part of the Yale folklore. Bagg's book barely mentions Skull and Bones, suggesting instead that the mystery behind the group is a hot bit of gossip among student circles. Though not delving into his own explanations, he notes that many people are fascinated by the group. Without mentioning anything specific, this tells us a number of things about Skull and Bones. First, in just fifty years, their reputation had been cemented among the student body. Second, that the enigmatic qualities of the society were as fascinating then as they are today. Third, Bagg's suggestion that the students "never tire" of dwelling on the group's mysteries tells us that, much like today, a great deal of information regarding Skull and Bones was kept firmly under wraps by all involved. Finally, the lack of background information given by the author indicates the extent to which rumors were commonplace on campus. Bagg never felt the need to go into great detail simply because the amount of speculation that swirled around the society, it seemed, was completely commonplace.

A Yale Society

But why did the group become such a center of attention? There are other groups, societies, and organizations at Yale that offer much of a similar social experience – at least on the surface. Skull and Bones had begun life as a replication of European counterparts, in response to a disagreement among those societies that already existed on campus. The only factors that seemed to differentiate the Order of the Skull and Bones from others were their morbid name, their well-kept secrecy, and the importance and influence of their members. When added together, it seemed as though their very existence was ripe for rumor.

According to Brooks Mather Kelley, the reason behind the interest in Yale's secret societies was simply due to the way in which university life was structured. Due to the recruiting policies of these groups, it was accepted that those who had been at the university a longer amount of time would pass on rumors and stories to the next generation. Like a children's game, these stories might evolve and change as they were being passed around, their features exaggerated for effect or to make the teller seem more

knowledgeable or important. With students keen to discover more about life away from their studies, the Order of the Skull and Bones provided them with a mystery that was right on their doorstep, a feature of the very institution they were now a part of. The seniors who then graduated from college, being possessed of more information, would look back over the initiation rituals and the rumors that surrounded such societies and perhaps fuel the fire of salacious stories that spread across campus. In fact, the very nature of Skull and Bones as a secret society meant that they were soon the most talked-about organization on campus. With people desperate to find out more about who they were and what they did, myths and legends began to spring up everywhere. This thought might well have pleased Russell, who intended for his organization to have the same reputation as its European forebears. But more significantly, it meant that – on those times when a morsel of truth did slip into the public domain – it was impossible to separate the truth from the rumor. The lies and stories that grew up around Skull and Bones were their best protection and best recruiting tool. Those who were tapped found themselves keen to learn more, while those who remained on the outside could only guess at what happened within the walls. Accordingly, much of the gossip on campus centered on the Skull and Bones without much real information ever leaving the confines of the Order's own building.

Since these early, mysterious days, Skull and Bones has become known across the country and now the world. Over the centuries, the stories about the group have not just been limited to their role in the university. There have been rumors that they regularly partake in a ritual whereupon they steal the skulls of famous people. Perhaps the most notorious of these is the skull of Native American leader Geronimo, whose missing cranium has been the subject of much speculation. This practice – known as "crooking" – will be covered later in the book, but it seems like one of the many theories that make up a tapestry of rumors surrounding the Order. Over time, the persistence of such stories has meant that the practice is now part of Skull and Bones law.

In a similar manner, the lack of concrete information about the Order has led many people to try to fill in the gaps themselves. The Internet has

become one of the greatest tools in the world for uncovering information about previously hidden matters. One need only look at the leaks of government material by Edward Snowden or organizations such as WikiLeaks to see that there is a means of distributing information about the previously clandestine. But along with the massive resources that we now have at our disposal, there is also a more debilitating side to the Internet that can hinder investigations. It can be tough to uncover correct and legitimate findings when so many websites are content to post unproven and speculative pieces regarding organizations such as Skull and Bones. Often, these conspiracy websites will be happy to distribute unverified and often untrue information simply to further theories and agendas. Information such as this must be separated and quarantined when conducting investigations into real-life matters. In truth, the emergence of the Internet has meant that the Order's collegiate reputation has grown. Just as rumors and misinformation spread across a 19th Century College campus adding to the notorious legend of the Order, the details that are circulated on the Internet fulfil much the same purpose. In this regard, trying to learn about the Order of Skull and Bones is just as difficult now as it was one hundred years ago.

Fact and Fiction

So then, that leaves us with one particularly tricky question: if we are to examine the history of the Order of the Skull and Bones, how can we separate fact from fiction? One of the best and most popular ways is to rely on the accounts given by the members themselves. If there is anything in which we can put greater amounts of trust regarding the Order, it is their members. The membership list of the group is one of the worst-kept secrets around. This is based on a number of reasons. First, no members really make any effort to hide their involvement from the public eye. As mentioned previously, a number of Bonesmen have held the highest office in American politics. While we know that Presidents have been members and have admitted to being involved, they very rarely actually discuss what happened within the confines of the Order.

Second, the involvement of people within societies on the Yale campus is often public knowledge. As well as the 19th Century societies we have already mentioned, there are a number of organizations that have sprung up in the wake of Skull and Bones replicating their secret stylings. Wolf's Head, the Scroll and Key, Book and Snake, and Berzelius have all risen at some point during the Order's history. One of the chief concerns shared among these groups is keeping information on who is involved in which society. It's been well known that the societies keep tabs on one another's members, often documenting in a charter or log book just who belongs to which society. Once a prospect is tapped, they can begin a long journey during which they are often observed at every step.

Finally, one of the most obvious reasons as to why the membership of the Order of the Skull and Bones is not too secret is simply because it is common knowledge which buildings they own. For years, the society has used many of the same meeting halls and congregation points. It would take an interested party arriving at these locations in any given year to write down who arrives at the door and who is allowed admittance. Added to this, thanks to the Russell Trust Association, we can look into the properties owned by the group and learn about those involved by following the paper trial.

As such, we can take it for granted that the membership itself into the group is not hidden. This is why so many histories of the Skull and Bones organization depend upon the membership lists for their starting point and seek to extrapolate information from there. However, this can be a dangerous practice and – as we will see later in this book – the actual details of the history of the members is far more interesting than people realize. There is a strict selection criteria that must be observed when the Order is tapping new recruits, and it is these people who form the bulk of the members.

A Fascinating Society

So then, if the information about who is able to join this secret society is so public, what makes the membership of the Order of the Skull and Bones so fascinating? Put simply, it is the information that we do not know which is typically the most tantalizing. There have been rumors, hints, and admissions about the variety of practices that are involved in the group. Tales of the occult, of strange initiation rituals, of extreme financial power, and influence beyond the grave have pervaded the legacy of the Order. Involvement in the group by so many powerful people over the years is, quite simply, not a coincidence. Instead, trying to determine what it is about the Order that imbues its members with such power, wealth, and influence becomes the chief point of interest for many people. As we look through the strict rules of the Order, their exploits, and the stories from their ex-members, and the conspiracies that surround them, we will begin to see just what it is that makes the prospect of the Skull and Bones such as thrilling proposition for so many people. As we break further from the known history of the group and delve deeper into the muddy waters, you might well be shocked and appalled by what we discover within. Now that we've given a brief outline of the group's existence, it's time to uncover more about the Order of the Skull and Bones.

Buildings, Branding, and Borrowed Signs

It might seem strange to some that a university society should own and operate a number of buildings and facilities. While the majority of organizations that gather in academic buildings can rely upon renting the odd hall or room or choose to meet in public places, the means by which Skull and Bones is able to make use of their own facilities is slightly different. They are not a fraternity, nor do they offer living quarters to those who become members. Instead, the buildings that are under their realm of influence are typically used once or twice a week, usually for a few hours. It might seem odd then, that such a group should own and operate a number of premises purely for the purpose of conducting their secret meetings. But when you realize the depth of wealth that is available to the former Bonesmen, as well as the close connections many alumni bear to the society, it should come as no surprise to see that so many people are willing to fund the facilities that allow the Order of the Skull and Bones to function in continued secrecy.

Yale

In order to get the best perspective on the history of the Order's use of buildings on campus, it is important to journey back through the history of societies on the Yale campus and understand the precedents that dictated how and when Russell's Order would meet. For the best example, we should look at Phi Beta Kappa, a chapter of which formed at Yale in 1780. Loosely standing (in Latin) for Philosophia Biou Kybernetes (or Love of Wisdom, the Guide of Life), the group sought to promote and endorse literature and friendly interchanges between the scholars at Yale, meeting and discussing topics such as politics, philosophy, ethics, and religion. There were other, similar groups at Yale from these times, including the Brothers in Unity and Linonia, centuries-old societies that focused on scholarly issues. Unlike these two groups, however, Phi Beta Kappa (or PBK) was designed to keep its activities a secret. For those on the outside, the membership of PBK and the occurrences within the confines of the

society were a mystery. With a membership composed of supposedly the best students at the university (plus a number of their less scholarly associates who were allowed in by merits of their acquaintances), the secret group was the forebear of the secret societies that would come later. They seemed to have the endorsement of the establishment, to the extent that they knew which members to recruit thanks to information gathered from the faculty.

The meeting practices of PBK formed the foundation for later secret societies at the university. Meetings were regular but not too often. At first, the group met once every two weeks, though this was eventually reduced to once a month. Their choice of location for these meetings was a building that was known to belong to another strange organization, the Freemasons. For anyone who has done their research into secret societies around the world, the Freemasons are a group whose name appears often and in many places. Loosely thought to be a social endeavor with knowledge and involvement ramping up as one moves higher through the ranks of the Order, many important people and many unimportant people have had some degree of involvement with the Freemasons. That one of Yale's first secret societies should share their meeting hall speaks of a close connection between the two and establishes a precedent of intimate knowledge that will echo along the annals of the university's history.

These sessions, meeting in the Freemasons hall, were scheduled for 6:30pm and would start on the dot. At each, there was typically a speech given by one of the members, and then a debate was held in which some of the most pressing matters of ethics or philosophy were bandied back and forth. For members who arrived late, there was a fine of sixpence, while those PBK members who skipped the meeting entirely were fined ten dollars, a not inconsequential sum at the time. That there should be a ten dollar fine tells of the importance of the meetings and of the resources of the members. For those members who were considered to have "flunked an appointment," the fine was doubled to twenty dollars. Once a year, around Christmas time, there would be a large dinner held for the PBK members. At these dinners, a graduated former member would deliver a speech, and then the officers for the next year would be elected. From what we know of what happened

during these meetings, the PBK organization was not involved in a great deal of mysterious activity. What drove the intrigue into the organization derived simply from their insistence on secrecy. Those who found themselves on the outside of the PBK circle were desperate to know what their fellow students were doing. This escalated to the point, when in 1786, three senior students knocked down the door of the secretary of the PBK and stole the society's secret papers that had been hidden in a trunk. It is not known what they uncovered, as a team of PBK members tracked down the guilty parties and sat them before a PBK council. In front of the council, the three seniors were compelled to sign written confessions – purely voluntary, of course – in which they promised never to tell anyone what they had learned from the papers (if there had even been anything at all.) The intrigue surrounding the event escalated even further, to the point where the trunk was stolen again just a year and half later.

A Need for Secrecy

But secrecy among Yale societies would become a bone of contention, not just among the students, but among the United States as a whole. It's possible to look at the events surrounding PBK in the 1830s to see just how suspicious people were becoming of the Masons and their influence, with the PBK on the Yale campus becoming a microcosm of this attitude. The first hints of rebellion came in 1830, when something called the Great Conic Sections Rebellion took place. Yale of the 19th Century was very different to that of today. One of the requisites for a Yale education was the ability to recite what was known as the conic sections. These were mathematical formulae and figures relating to the geometric curves that might be found in circles and ellipses. As part of their education, Yale students were expected to be able to recite these conic sections and were tested accordingly. Fury was sparked when some students accused their more privileged counterparts of being allowed to depend on books and resources during the test. They wanted the same opportunity. When faced with their examinations, they steadfastly refused to listen to the faculty.

The university was furious. They took action against the students, claiming that they had formed a "combination to resist the government." After this, all Yale classes were suspended and students were forced to sign a document that ensured that they agreed to obey the rules and laws of the institution. Nearly half of the 1832 class refused to sign and were forcibly expelled from Yale. Their names were placed on a blacklist, and they were never allowed to attend another university. These events occurred against the backdrop of a widespread anti-masonic movement in the United States. People were beginning to grow distrustful of the extent to which this secret society could influence the government. A presidential candidate emerged with the promise of dispelling America's secret societies, echoing the same resentment of privilege that had compelled the Yale students to stand up. At the university, this growing distrust of secret societies meant that PBK was forced to abandon their more secretive policies. Already the most suspected group on campus, their fondness for clandestine meetings in Freemason halls meant that they were at the center of the masonic scandal running through America.

As a response, many of PBK's secrets were published. The secret handshakes they used and the signs they had invented were made public knowledge. All of their secret ceremonies were banned. Soon it seemed that as the secrecy was stripped from PBK, they lost their allure. Without the secrecy that had intrigued so many, few people were that interested in another, run-of-the-mill Yale society. PBK lost many of its members to the scandal and eventually closed their doors for many decades. The Order of the Skull and Bones was founded in the aftermath of the PBK scandal. As Phi Beta Kappa diminished in popularity, a far more secretive and clandestine group took their place. They learned lessons from PBK, and it seems that one of the key factors that Russell incorporated into the establishing of the Order was the need for their own private quarters, one which would not associate them with the Freemasons and tar them with the same brush that had led to the downfall of one of Yale's premier secret organizations.

Russell's Version

In fact, the emergence of Russell's group bears closer bonds to the fall of PBK than you might expect. It was in the academic year of 1832 to 1833 that a man named William Russell, the valedictorian of the 1833 class, was elected secretary of the Yale PBK chapter. As secretary, he was included in the process of electing the next wave of PBK officers and was shocked to discover that one of those he felt best suited to the positions – Eleazar Kingsbury Foster – had been purposefully left of the election slate. Apoplectic, he came out and openly condemned the PBK, and by December of 1832, had colluded with Foster to recruit 13 other students, among them Alfonso Taft, to take what they had learned from the PBK downfall and begin a brand new secret society, the Order of the Skull and Bones. Russell had been an elected secretary of Phi Beta Kappa. Few knew better how the organization was run and how it related to the Yale establishment. It is clear that Russell learned the essentials of the American secret academic society and combined it with his knowledge of the European models that he had been exposed to. Thanks to the anti-masonic scandal, Russell knew that the meeting of the upper-echelons of the student body must be more secret than ever before. As such, the need for secrecy in Skull and Bones was paramount. While PBK had used their mysterious operations to build up a reputation, Skull and Bones were forced to be secret if they wanted to continue to meet. Had they been discovered, they would have been expelled and blacklisted.

The combination of European and American models of the secret society can be seen in the way in which Skull and Bones first began to brand themselves. It is thought that the obsession with death- and bone-orientated imagery is a reflection of an unnamed society that Russell discovered when touring through Germany. He brought back this morbid branding, combined it with the structural organization and practices of his PBK experiences, and began to build a secret society that fused together the best of both continents. There is some evidence to suggest that Skull and Bones is, in fact, just another chapter in just another, much older organization. Documents have been discovered from within the halls which seem to suggest there were jubilee and anniversary celebrations of the establishing of an "American chapter." Another document, taken from 1933, celebrates

the anniversary of the society's "Yale chapter." When considering these theories, there is a huge lack of evidence, chiefly the name of the parent organization. Skull and Bones contains many features and practices that are somewhat unique to the American interpretation of a secret society. However, it is likely that William Russell wished to lend credence to his nascent organization by tying its history together with more celebrated predecessors. Rather than a chapter, it could well be the spiritual continuity of the older European models that are so celebrated by the group. Rather than attempting to trace the group's history back to the ancient orders in Europe – which is slightly disingenuous – we can instead recognize the emergence of the Order of the Skull and Bones as the establishment of a brand new superpower among American secret societies. In order to build their foundations of credibility, Russell borrowed heavily from the European influence, likely wished to suggest a common heritage with many of these groups, and nowhere is this more evident than in the buildings themselves.

The Tomb

Ask anyone about buildings belonging to the Order of Skull and Bones and the most common response will be about the Tomb. A morbid name, it certainly ties in with the ideas of death that surrounded so much of the group's branding and symbolism. However, the Tomb, while being the most notorious home of the Order, was only built some two decades after the founding of the organization. Construction of the first wing of the building began in 1856, while additional sections were added later. In 1903, for example, a second wing was added onto the structure, while a set of Neo-Gothic towers were erected in the garden in the rear of the building in 1912. The architectural decisions hearken back to Europe and the Old World, using an Egypto-Doric blend that calls to mind Greek architecture. Suitable for a society established on the basis of ancient philosophy and ethics, the columns at the rear are both a throwback to this European heritage and help form an enclosed space around the rear of the building. To look at it, the Tomb is both intimidating and almost unremarkable. There is very little of note, which is in itself noteworthy. Designed to be both inconspicuous and

imposing at the same time, it offers no answers about what happens inside and provide little other than clues as to its intended purpose. Many of the architects involved with the developing building have either been Bonesmen themselves or have been related to members. Accordingly, every addition is a carefully considered extension of the group's ideology.

When stepping inside, the link to Europe's secret societies is apparent. Not much has changed in the years since the Tomb was first constructed and decorated, and many of the accounts we have of its interior remain consistent to this day. A number of German artifacts – coats of arms, artworks – can be found hanging from the walls, while there is a repeated use of German-language mottos written across the walls. One picture, as described by a witness, features a number of imagery-heavy additions. The composition is of a burial vault left deliberately open. Around the vault are four human skulls, arranged on the stone slab to surround a jester's hat. There is also a book left open, a number of mathematical instruments, a beggar's cup, and an abandoned crown. Written in German is a riddle. The riddle asks the audience which man was the wise one and which one the fool, asking them to choose between the beggar and the king. Finally, inscribed beneath – again in German – is a motto proclaiming that both the rich and the poor are equal in death. The picture is a fine example of the aesthetic form within the Tomb and the eye is drawn to a small card positioned next to the picture, which says that the painting was a gift from the Order's "German chapter."

Elsewhere on the walls are five photographs of typical scenes from the day-to-day life of German students. The photographs are clearly quite old, though the legend bears no indication as to whom they might be portraying or which German society they depict. It's not just pictures that represent the adoption of German student culture throughout the halls of the Tomb. If you happen to arrive on one of the busier nights in the social calendar, you might well hear the refrains of the members as they sing a selection of the Skull and Bones songs that have been conjured especially for the society. Though most are unknown, it has been confirmed by at least one source that the original tune for one of the hymns is "Deutschland Uber Alles," a famed German anthem written by the composer Haydn. Experts on the society's

history have made a point to separate the pars of the organization from the present. There was a time, they point out, when the society owed a great debt to the existence of its European equivalents and strove to replicate itself after their customs and aesthetics. Though many of the aesthetics still remain, they are largely decorative now, and any channels of communication that might have existed between Skull and Bones and German societies is now restricted or at least kept a secret to the majority of members. Instead, the influence and power of the modern members is enough to elevate Skull and Bones to one of the most important organizations worldwide. While Germany might have been a leading world superpower in the 19th Century, there is no doubt that today the United States occupies that position.

The Traditions

This changing adherence to traditions might strike some as odd. For many, the expected behavior of a secret society is that it would demand absolute knowledge of the society's past by its members and a reverence for what has come before. But the Order of Skull and Bones is different. For an excellent example of why this is the case, we need only turn to a pamphlet produced in 1933 and given to new members. Produced on the centenary of the group's founding and designed to provide a "continuation of the history of our order," the pamphlet declares quite emphatically that there is "no History of the Bones." Phrased as a confession on behalf of the reader, those who are exposed to the pamphlet are compelled to agree that there is nothing else but the Order itself. Rather than having a set of traditions, it states that the "heavy thinkers of the barbarian 20th century" might be perplexed by such problems, but true Bonesmen know that there is nothing of worth other than the Order, and as such, the history of the European ties and the founding of Skull and Bones is simply an afterthought. What is important is the present and how it can affect the current members.

At first, however, the Tomb was not available to the members of the Order of the Skull and Bones. During the early days, there was still a sense of danger and secrecy that demanded the group hide themselves from the Yale

authorities. As such, they started with an unassuming name. Titled the Eulogian Club, the group could seem to pass for any other generic society or even church organization should the authorities even investigate further. Still keeping itself from the public eye, the bland name acted as a shield against prying eyes and offered members the chance to pass off their whereabouts and actions without implicating other Bonesmen. At first, many of the recruits were picked from members of a more traditional society, those who Russell and his friends felt fit the template. Together, they began to gather in meetings, and the Order of the Skull and Bones began to take on a more familiar aesthetic. It was a year before the sign of the Skull and Bones began to appear around campus. The group would often meet in a chapel, far away from the Freemason hall that might raise suspicion.

The first record of any sort of recognition from the faculty towards the new society came in 1833. As far as we can tell, the Yale authorities were alerted to a meeting that had gotten particularly out of hand. They called an emergency meeting on Christmas Day to look into the group. After a short discussion, it was decided that nine members of the new society would receive letters warning them to cease their actions and another letter would be sent to their parents. Among those who received the letters were the future treasurer of Yale, a man who would become a congressman, and a person destined to sit on the Supreme Court of Louisiana. After the letters were sent out, the group pulled back further from public view and began to guard their actions with greater efficiency.

Another important piece of Skull and Bones branding would arrive shortly after. Along with the name – as well as the cover name, the Eulogian Club, supposedly in reference to the invented god of eloquence – there was a marked increase in the use of a specific number. Early on in the society's life, the number "322" begins to appear more and more frequently. There have been many theories as to why this exact number was chosen. Some have suggested that it might tie into numerology or the ancient Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah. Other people have pointed out that the renowned Greek philosopher Demosthenes died in the year 322 BC. There have been suggestions in the laws and histories of the Skull and Bones that the year

322 BC is given as the day on which Eulogia (their invented goddess) ascended up unto heaven, set to return in the year 1832 with the founding of the society. This is certainly the cover story given for the use of the number 322, which is used by every member when signing official, relevant documents. When communicating with another Bonesman, for example, it is common to see the phrase "yours in 322" appear alongside the signatures. However, the story is only given certain amounts of credence among some scholars, who suspect that it is simply a convenient explanation for something more complex and potentially controversial. Until we are able to uncover more specific information, we can only report the theories. With the explanation likely being one of the most closely guarded secrets, however, this particular piece of Bones lore and branding will remain a mystery for the foreseeable future.

While we might not know the reason for the repeated use of 322 among the Bonesmen, our investigations note that it is not something that is forgotten upon leaving Yale. One of the most commonly cited examples is the donation that was made to the society anonymously when George W. Bush became a member in 1967, with a check issued to the tune of $322,000. Another example is the office extension number of a man named David Thorne. Thorne is not only the former brother-in-law of John Kerry (a Bonesman), but was his campaign manager and friend, himself a member of the Order during the 1960s. Thorne, when selecting the extension number for his office phone, personally requested number 322.

A Legitimate Branch

Things changed slightly in 1856, when the Russell Trust Association became an actual extension of the society. Following this move, the Order could stop their scattered meetings across campus. Nearly two decades after the original founding of the group, there were now enough alumni to gather together the funds for a permanent home. Inside, the Bonesmen could decorate and detail in their idiosyncratic manner. Rather than having to move constantly around campus, hanging up Skull and Bones signs and leaving their 322 mark wherever they met, the Russell Trust Association

meant that they could meet up and conduct their business away from prying eyes. Following the persecution of secret societies during the early days, the furor had died down and once again there was a place on the Yale campus for a secret society who wanted to gather together the very best the university had to offer but away from the constant gaze attached to many, more mainstream groups.

At the time of construction, the Tomb cost the Order between $7,000 and $8,000. This was not an inconsequential sum for the time and speaks of the amount of investment and resources that were at the disposal of those who had an active interest in the group. According to the documents we have been able to recover, $5,300 was designated for the wall, foundations, and the structure of the building, while the remainder was spent on furnishing the property. The brown sandstone walls give nothing away to the casual observer, creating a depth of color that seems to draw in anything of interest without revealing anything about the contents of the building. Similarly, the dark glass used means that the windows allow in only a small amount of light and prevent those on the outside from catching a glimpse of what might happen on the inside. Of course, with the property designed to host functions and celebrations, there must be a kitchen and servants' quarters. These are contained in the depths of the building and are found near the heavy iron emergency exit. All around the building, as is typical for New Haven, there are thin, spindly trees. During the long winter months, these bare trunks look like the bones which lend the society its morbid name.

In all, the Tomb is three stories high, with an attic space located at the top of the building. While the construction work itself has interested many who have attempted to read secrets into the design decisions that have been made through the ages, often the best way in which to get an insight into the ethos of the society is to consider the number of possessions that line the walls. As we will discover later in the book, the way in which the Order chose to decorate the property (and in particular, the items they acquired) holds great sway in how they present themselves. There are examples of ancient taxidermy, flickering candles, suited knights in ancient armor, flags from boats and ships, traditional blankets from around the world hidden inside old trunks, tributes to Buddha who rides atop an elephant, and – with

another link to 322 BC – statues of Demosthenes. These items have been accumulated throughout the society's long history, each one speaking to one aspect of the group's mysterious ideology. The overall effect, however, is eerily intimidating. The sheer volume of paraphernalia can overwhelm, while the low lighting and morbid quality of many pieces can put many people on edge.

The large majority of these items are gifts from former members. As well as these curiosities, a common donation from ex-members are pieces of art. Over the time in which the Order has been active, they have received a number of paintings from their alumni, all fitting a similar theme. Those most befitting of the Skull and Bones moniker are pieces such as the one donated by Russell Cheney, an oil painting of dancing skeletons gathered in a garden. The majority of the modern decoration was handled by John Walter Cross, an architect who was part of the Order during the turn of the 19th Century. The skeletal figures are common and skulls litter many nooks and crannies. Elsewhere in the house, donations such as the complete works of Demosthenes and a first edition of the experimental novel *The Life and Opinons of Tristram Shandy* demonstrate the importance of considered literature and philosophy. It might seem, when entering the Tomb, that there one is entering a Victorian menagerie. But in truth, each item is considered and chosen for the effect it imparts on the unassuming observer.

American University Life

But, as we have mentioned, there is always an indication within the Skull and Bones that it is an American society. Nothing says this better than the tribute to America's game, baseball. A fitting tribute to the Order's loyalty to their academic institute can be found stored in a glass case in a distant corner of the building. Behind this glass are a number of gilded baseballs, each taken from games involving the Yale team. Written nearby are the dates and names of the games in which they were used, remembering the university's history, commemorating the country's most popular sport, and demonstrating the wealth and importance of the society in one fell swoop.

There have been recent reports from certain modern members that the interior of the Tomb is not quite as grand as it might once have been. Though the Order is still an important and wealthy society on campus, the sheer amount of donated items and gifts they have received has meant that the inside has become crowded, and certain items have been difficult to maintain. Still used as much as it ever was, the Tomb suffers from being a strange combination of museum, political statement, and functioning society hall all at once.

As you might expect from a society named Skull and Bones, there is a consistent emphasis on death. War and its tumultuous effects are a constant theme, with many of the Bonesmen being involved in conflicts at home and abroad. Everything from Civil War rifles to the boots from World War II serve to remind the members of the constancy of death, as well as German helmets and machine guns that are found along various passageways. A little hint at the morbid humor can be found in one Latin inscription, "tempus fugit," which translates as "time flies." Added to this, there are skeletons, skulls, and bones of both humans and animals. The crockery, the cutlery, and the painted panels on the wall are all emblazoned with the group's familiar skull imagery, while cups and mugs are fashioned in the shape of skulls. Throughout the entire building, death is not only presented as a threatening image, but it is also celebrated and cherished. This is exemplified by the tablet laid down in the main foyer that bears a dedication to "the departed Bones," warning the living that they should remember that "you must die."

When discussing why the Order of the Skull and Bones is seemingly obsessed with death, a former member of the society suggested that it was a deliberate decision to remind the current members of their place within the world. The purpose of the décor is to offer up a self-aggrandizing message to those who are walking the halls. Despite the large amount of power and influence that many Bonesmen already (and/or will eventually) wield, they should remember that are at the mercy of mortality as much as the next man. The skull of a king, members are constantly reminded, looks just like that of a pauper. While this message might be popular among the Bonesmen and something the society holds aloft, it certainly is increasing the attention

that the group receives from elsewhere. Indeed, the imagery of the Order of the Skull and Bones society is certainly eye-catching and leads many people to believe that there's an ulterior, sinister motive to all of their actions.

The Inner Temple

At the center of the Tomb, however, there is one room that is a little bit different. Named the Inner Temple, or simply Room 322, it is the most private part of the property and the place where the most secret of rituals take place. Getting in is difficult. The door is huge, a locked and bolted iron slab that has held firm against a number of break-ins that have taken place over the years. The room inside is a rough square, with each side measuring close to fourteen feet. Wainscoting rises up the first four feet of the walls above which are hung the most cherished oil paintings in the building. Other than the door, the only other interruption is the black marble fireplace. As you step in, you immediately cross over a mosaic that depicts, once again, the number 322. Look up and you'll see an engraving on the far wall, with the number again emblazoned, this time beneath the name Demosthenes. Skull and Bones imagery is everywhere in the minutest of details. The roof is something unexpected, however, opening up to a sky blue dome with a small skylight placed right in the center. The light shines down onto a table that is permanently set up in the room, which holds the same items every single day: a skull balanced carefully on a cushion, and an hourglass filled with sand that will measure out exactly five minutes.

This is the room where a number of strange rituals and ceremonies are performed. These will be covered later in the book, though it can be important to note that there is a small tocsin (the type of bell one might normally find in a church) that is rung during these occasions. There are rumors that this is the same bell that belonged to Yale University during its early years, which was sounded to signify events on campus. There is also a large grandfather clock of unknown origin, made identifiable by the skull and crossbones written across its face. Situated beneath an ancient Yale flag, the clock has been featured in photos we have of members posing inside the society walls. Scattered across the room are further items of

significance to the organization, whether they are skulls or a pair of spectacles that are rumored to belong to a former president of the university.

The feature of the Inner Temple that most catches the eye, however, is the looming specter of a large case, within which is placed a human skeleton. Known among the Bonesmen as “the Madame,” due to the fact that many believed the bones to belong to Madame de Pompadour (a mistress of the French King Louis XV.) Sections of the case to the sides of the skeleton hold some of the Order’s most valuable and treasured possessions, while a child-sized coffin is placed at the feet of the Madame. The coffin’s former occupant, suitably smaller, can be found hanged just above the mantelpiece. Beneath the child skeleton is a small gilded frame that features a small gold door. Reaching behind this will reveal a small switch, that when pressed, opens a secret compartment, in which is hidden a wooden engraving of the goddess Eulogia.

In order to gain access to the Inner Temple, one will need to procure the skeleton key. This is hidden away in a separate room named the Nest. Aside from the Nest and the Inner Temple, the other most secure place in the building is found in the northwest part of the Tomb. There is a single wooden step that leads up to a walk-in vault, decorated in black. To get in, one must know the combination lock that is changed on a regular basis. The contents are not public knowledge, but it has been theorized that this is the place where the society keeps their most important pieces. This could be information about the members, details of their finances, information they have regarding other societies on campus or around the world, data gathered about the faculty and the rest of Yale, and anything else they deem too valuable to risk exposing to those who gain entry to the main building. As well as this, the room next to the vault is a striking contrast. Just as the reminders of the mortality of both rich and poor are spread through the building, the most valuable items are kept next to what seems to be a junk room. Whereas the vault contains the most important items, right next door is the storage room for anything not deemed worthy of being put out in the house, including rumors of broken skulls and even a fake head of a gorilla. Though the contrast might seem striking, there are one or two people who claim that this apparent junk room is simply another disguise, and that some

of the most valuable items are hidden among the junk, secreted away in plain view.

Other Locations

But the Tomb is not the only place that Skull and Bones has used to house its affairs. There may be many properties that come under the banner of the Russell Trust Association or various shell companies, but the only other place we can be sure that it has used in the past is much more secluded than their regular meeting places. Found in the middle of the St. Lawrence River, Deer Island is a retreat owned and operated by the Order of the Skull and Bones. Covering close to forty acres, it has been closely detailed by many people who have somehow gained access to the island. Intended to offer somewhere quiet where Bonesmen can gather together and rekindle their friendships, it has seen a great deal of development over the years, though less attention has been paid to it recently.

Around a century ago, Deer Island featured many of the luxurious trappings of the rich and powerful. There were supposedly a number of tennis courts and even a softball field. The surrounding plant life includes gooseberry bushes and rhubarb, though those in search of a real meal are catered to by the servants and chefs who arrive by the catboats situated all over the river. It was common for elegant and ostentatious dinner parties and gatherings to be held on the island, which is far from the public view and the prying eyes of the university authorities. It is tradition that each and every new recruit into the Order must visit the island at one point or another, though it is commonly accepted that the location has fallen into a state of disrepair as the society has lost interest in using it as a retreat. Whether this means that they now go elsewhere or whether there is genuinely no need for such a location, it is still owned by the Russell Trust Association and will continue to be regarded as one of the Bonesmen's most important sites. There have even been reports of fires on the island, which seems to imply burned out houses and abandoned buildings, having been described as being "basically ruins" these days.

It seems as though Deer Island was more geared towards the legacy aspects of the Skull and Bones experience. While the Tomb was the designated gathering point for those who were still attending Yale, it would not suffice for welcoming home those who had graduated and wished to reminisce over their university days. Due to the high profile of many of their alumni, the secrecy offered by Deer Island in the 19th and early 20th Centuries meant that the rich and powerful could arrive there to meet without having their privacy compromised. But in this age of telephoto lenses and drone aircraft, Deer Island does not offer the same promise of isolation that it once did. Couple that with the fact that it is now one of the best-known parts of the Skull and Bones mythos, it should be no surprise to see that the island has fallen out of favor as a meeting place.

Instead, the best place for Bonesmen who require a bit of privacy might well be back on the campus of Yale University. While it might seem counterintuitive to think that the most hidden of places is the one so closely associated with the Order, there is more to their property than meets the eye. It is commonly accepted that the Tomb has at least one secret tunnel. Though there may be more, the only one which has been confirmed offers Bonesmen a direct route from the Tomb to a tiny hidden garden. The tunnel itself it lit by candle light and painted in a blood-red hue. A winding spiral staircase leads travelers through the gloom and towards the gothic towers. From here, the Bonesmen can survey the entire campus (jokingly referred to as “the realm,” tellingly) and can hide from those who might be keeping the front entrance under close guard. Between the two towers is an enclosed courtyard that resembles something from a medieval monastery. Featuring a mosaic, a patio, a set of sculptures, and a bench, it was constructed in 1872 by Theodore Woolsey and intended to offer solitude and quiet to society members. Capable of fitting around fifteen people, it is perfect for those most private of gatherings that must be kept under wraps at all costs. With hidden spaces such as these, and the ongoing penchant for morbid branding, it should not be a surprise to learn that so many people tie the Order of the Skull and Bones to nefarious purposes.

Rites, Rituals, and Initiation

Think about any campus-based society or fraternity, and one of the most common questions always involves the initiation ceremony. Whether it's a simple oath, a harsh hazing, or something decidedly more sinister, the ways in which people are inducted into university societies holds a huge amount of interest to those who have not passed through the process. For people who are on the outside looking in, the induction into any kind of society seems like it would involve a bizarre and complicated ceremony that makes little sense. When we combine this with the similar practices in the Freemasons and other secret societies, it is expected that the Order of the Skull and Bones must possess some ritualistic means of initiating their members into the group. As such, the rites, rituals, and initiation ceremony of the Order is one of the most hotly contested and fascinating parts of studying the group.

Rituals and Rumors

One of the main reasons why people obsess over the various initiation processes that are used in campus societies is the way in which the media has portrayed them. Likely based on some truth, mixed with interpretation and exaggeration, everyone expects these ceremonies to be humiliating, strange, and tinged with something of the occult. Often, it is thought, the ritual will be so embarrassing or demeaning as to bond the inductee to the group for the rest of time. Should these details get out, it is suggested, then their reputation will be left in ruin. Put simply, those who are searching for these kind of rites and initiations are often left wanting. But in an Order where there is already a heavy obsession with the morbid, the close proximity of many occult items, and a reputation for involving some of the most powerful people to have come out of Yale in the last century and a half, the means of entering into the Order of the Skull and Bones is certainly strange.

Like every property owned by a society on the Yale campus, there is an acknowledgement that only society members should be allowed inside. While other organizations might be lax with these rules and may allow for

guests and invited parties, the Skull and Bones society keep their priorities strict. Walking in to the Tomb, one of the first things that one might see is an old sign from a dusty backwater part of Middle America. While the sign is likely stolen, the words echo true with the sentiment expressed by every single Bonesman around. “This is a private club,” the sign states in capital letters, “be prepared to show membership card.” The sign, however, is something of a side joke. To gain entrance to the Temple, one must need much more than just a card.

Rosenbaum

Interest in the Order of the Skull and Bones is not new. In 2001, for example, the investigative journalist Ron Rosenbaum began to grow more and more interested in the rumours of the activities that were happening within the walls of the Tomb and the influence which Skull and Bones was beginning to have on the world of American politics. In all, Rosenbaum has spent close to twenty-five years investigating secret societies and was able to uncover what he believed to be the very first account of what one of the Order’s initiation ceremonies looks like. Acquiring an audiotape of the ceremony supposed to have taken place in 2000, he came across the recording after being approached by a student. Building on this, Rosenbaum professed to have infiltrated the group and used night vision recording equipment to glance into the ground of the Tomb in 2001. Able to record both audio and video, they were supposedly able to look into the courtyard that the Bonesmen believed to be their secluded sanctuary. According to the journalist, the recording that was made depicts a man representing the former Bonesman and then-recently elected President George W. Bush. He was locked in a heated debate with an unnamed person, in which he threatened to “ream” the other party just as he had “reamed Al Gore” (who had been Bush’s opponent in the Presidential race).

According to Rosenbaum, this was all part of the ceremony. Rather than part of a high stakes political battle, these arguments came down to screamed threats thrown by the Bonesmen towards those who were hoping to join the Order. Along with the aforementioned comments, there were

references to Abner Louima, a Haitian immigrant who had recently made the news after being tortured by the NYPD. There was shouting and screaming, with demands such as “lick my bum-hole, neophyte” being flung towards the potential recruits. The ceremony closed when one of the authoritative figures broke out a butcher’s knife. Wearing nothing but animal furs, he wielded the blade in front of the recruits, standing over a nude woman who seemed to be covered in blood. The so-called “neophyte” was then forced to approach a skull placed just a few feet from the body and lean down to kiss it on the polished bone. As his lips met the skull, the man with the knife bent down and carefully rubbed the blade along the neophyte’s neck, pretending to slit his throat. With that, the recording ends and the figures move back into the building.

Rosenbaum has since used this footage to put forward a number of theories about what took place that night. According to the journalist, this ceremony was evidence of the extent to which the group has exerted control over media moguls, diplomats, spies, and bankers. Rituals such as this can be used, he says, to seal their involvement in a lifelong fraternity and brotherhood, supplying the group with direct access to huge amounts of power. But while these accusations have often been levelled at Skull and Bones (simply due to the demographics of their alumni), Rosenbaum’s accusations went further. He suggested that the CIA might be involved, as well as Time Inc., a Secretary of State, and a group of National Security Advisors under the Order’s control. He goes on to say that events such as the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the invasion of the Bay of Pigs, and the Vietnam war were all inventions of the families who had passed through the annals of the Order of the Skull and Bones, such as the Tafts, the Bundys, and the Lovetts. According to him, they all took part in the ritual his film depicted and were thus bonded to the society for life.

The release of the footage cause quite a shock. It even got mentioned in mainstream media, such as ABC News, who ran images and clips from the footage and interviewed Rosenbaum about what he had seen and what he belied it meant. It was described as a “great day” in the history of American investigative journalism by some sneering commentators, who didn’t quite believe that Rosenbaum deserved the attention that he so clearly adored.

But it was a worldwide sensation. As far away as Sweden, people were discussing the Skull and Bones initiation ceremony. It further cemented the idea of the Order as an international force to be reckoned with and made Rosenbaum's name, however briefly, famous around the world. It speaks of just how suspicious people are of the Order and their reputation that people were so willing to belief the story.

An Alternate Story

However, there have been aspersions cast over the veracity of Rosenbaum's footage. One graduate of Yale (and a member of other societies) described the ritual as being "too vulgar" for the Order of the Skull and Bones. Rather than a display of obvious power and imagery, this person was under the impression that the ceremony for initiating the new members of the organization was rather a process of educating them on the history of the Order and its importance within the world. It is designed, according to this source, to impress and to leave initiates awestruck rather than to terrify and intimidate them. The ceremony as depicted by Rosenbaum seemed too much like a schlocky, horror, B movie to be real. One Bonesman who attended Yale during the 1970s says that the process is more concerned with passing on the Order's history than with cheap scares. As such, it has been suggested that Rosenbaum witnessed something else. Perhaps a skit or prank organized by the group in the knowledge that he was watching. It might have been a joke which blew out of proportion or a deliberate sleight of hand designed to distract from the Order's real rituals. By giving the public a theatrical, almost comedic image, the Order was able to present themselves as silly and non-threatening. While Rosenbaum might have gained the Order more attention, it was publicity that was manageable and dismissible. Indeed, one Bonesman, when asked about the subject, admitted that they purposefully wanted to joke around with the journalist and were well aware of his recording.

Recruitment

Getting a grip on the society's most secret rituals, it seems, is very difficult. There is a determination to keep the most intimate of the group's secrets secret, and they are willing to misdirect, distract, and otherwise obstruct in order to maintain this veil of mystery. Accordingly, you would imagine that this makes recruitment into the Order a very tricky business. One wrong move and the Bonesmen might find themselves exposed by someone who is willing to trade all of their secrets for some quick cash or notoriety. So how are candidates selected?

The process of recruitment for the Order is known, as we have already mentioned, as "tapping." During the early years of the society, this was a very private affair. On the designated evening, the fifteen extant Bonesmen would meet together in the darkest of the night and move silently around campus. When arriving at the residence of their intended recruit, they would enter baring a real skull and bones. Presenting the remains to the target, they would ask the recruit whether they accepted the society's invitation. Regardless of the response, the group would then file out in total silence. Only later would the recruit know their fate.

But this process soon became notorious on the Yale campus. After a short while, the other students realized what would be happening and became understandably fascinated by the tapping of the new members. Rather than a group of fifteen cloaked figures, there was soon a procession of interested parties who followed the Bonesmen around campus. This meant that they were forced to abandon their proclivity for meeting at midnight, and in order to maintain some semblance of mystery, began to appear to new recruits at more random hours. The group was whittled down until it was just one or two senior Bonesmen (people who understood the gravitas and the importance of the invitation), who arrived at the younger man's dorm and presented their offer. On the rare occasions when the student declined the offer of the Order, increasingly senior members of the society would be sent to repeat the invitation in a more persuading manner.

Tapping as a Competition

At the end of the 19th Century, however, the sheer number of societies on the Yale campus and their similar recruitment policies meant that the tapping of new recruits became a big event. For most societies, there was an "A-list" of desirable recruits and then a backup list should they be rejected. For Skull and Bones, however, the possibility that they might be rejected was nonsensical. For a long time, there was resistance to the idea that they might be in any way rejected by potential recruits, who would surely be mad not to join. However, the increased competition for the new waves of Yale scholars meant that by 1928, the society had received eight rejections from those that tapped. Unlike the other societies, they refused to do any preliminary investigations into who might accept and who might decline their offer. From then on, they were more organized and more determined to land their first choices when it came to filling out the Tomb with the best and the brightest.

Accordingly, there is a history within the society of attempting to hoodwink the other groups in order to land the most desirable targets. In 1871, another group named Scroll and Key attempted to organize the societies on campus to move the initiation ceremonies forward in the calendar in order to better teach the incoming students coming into the club before the older members graduated. Skull and Bones declined to answer the letter, and it was assumed that the tapping would occur at the regular time. Instead, Skull and Bones launched their recruitment a full three weeks before the other societies. The move was brash enough to make the local news, while the Yale Literary Magazine (whose editor was a Bonesman) took a gloating approach to the reportage.

A similar event occurred in 1917. Provoked by the onset of the World War I and the American involvement in the conflict, the three most important societies on campus decided to begin their recruitment early. A pair of Bonesmen, Robert Lovett and F. Trubee Davison, had been instrumental in setting up a Naval Aviation Unit made of Yale students in preparation for the war. Davison's father was the financier for the project. Such was the wealth poured into the unit that they earned the nickname "the millionaires' unit." As the move to war escalated and other societies suggested that recruitment begin early, Skull and Bones found that they had been

distracted and demanded that the recruitment be delayed in order to allow them to catch up. The date they demanded was the 19th of April, almost two full weeks after America had decided to enter into the war. During this time, the Naval Aviation Unit had partnered fully with the military and had been flown out to West Palm Beach to begin full preparations. With them went a huge number of the most desirable candidates for the recruitment that yea. They stayed together in an old hotel. This was where the recruitment ceremony took place, with the other groups having to enter into the organization of the Skull and Bones in order to try and get their men. The choices were made at the base, information which was then relayed through telephone and telegram conversations back to campus. Arriving at the base, former Bonesmen who were in the area were able to initiate the new members before the other societies realized what was happening. Thanks to their process of taking the group away from the campus and being prepared for the initiation right away, they had secured their desired candidates.

A Public Affair

Up until the end of the 20th Century, the names and details of those who had been selected by the Yale societies would be printed in the Yale Daily News and the New York Times. With column space limited, the names printed were only those selected by the most important societies, while others could have their names printed in exchange for a small fee. In 1919, following that year's tapping, the Yale Daily News changed the process. In the place where one might expect to see the list of all the top societies, there was instead only the details for the very first and the very last man to have been tapped by Skull and Bones, written in large print. This kind of exclusivity was unprecedented. It should be no surprise to see that the managing editor of the publication was a member of the Order, Henry Luce. Luce would play a key role in founding Time Inc. by the next issue and issued an apology for the "oversight." But his actions confirmed to many what was already known to most on campus. While there were a number of secret societies on the Yale campus, there was only really one with any real influence and only one that really mattered: the Order of the Skull and Bones.

One leaked document from the 1960s possibly best represents the approach of the Order to recruiting new members. The guide on how to approach potential new members is very strict. It impresses upon the Bonesmen that they should under no circumstances appear to be desperate to recruit a certain member. They must instead always remain "cool and concise," with the privacy of the Order prioritized above all else. Trying too hard to convince a potential member seems out of sorts and, in so powerful a society, not an impression they need to make. Instead, an offer is extended, and should it be met with any reticence, the recruit should be informed about the nature of the society and the advantages it will bring. The Order of the Skull and Bones is "based on such intangible factors that we cannot meaningfully convey to you either its nature or its quality." Join the Order, it suggests, and you will be welcomed into an inner circle and provided with riches and knowledge beyond your wildest dreams. Since the middle of the 20th Century, the tapping of Yale students had again become a private matter.

Recruiting Traditions

Recruitment for the Order follows a precedent. Each year, there is a willingness to offer membership to the same "types" of student, those who fit into a mold of what has come before. This process has led to other societies accusing the Order of recruiting "tokens," students taken for their profile rather than their merit. But the history of who might be recruited is limited the further back we look into Yale's history. For example, there was a long period of time when the large majority of students fit into one particular demographic: white, protestant Americans from a privileged background. It was many years before Catholic or Jewish students made up a sizable portion of the student body, longer still before non-white or female students were allowed to attend the university. Ideally, each current member looks through the incoming possibilities and selects the person that will replace them. These choices are then presented before the Order, who can approve or veto their inclusion. One veto (otherwise known as a blackball)

and the candidate might be asked to appear before the society and present their case. Two vetoes and the candidate is automatically rejected.

Though many of the early years of Skull and Bones were filled with the same type of person, later years have seen the remit expand. A leaked document from 1968 outlines the “ideal” group who might be recruited in any one year. Based almost entirely on stereotypes, the literature suggests the following be recruited:

1. The captain of the football team
2. The chairman of the Yale Daily News
3. Someone who is a “conspicuous radical”
4. A Whiffenpoof (an a cappella singer)
5. The captain of the swim team
6. A “notorious drunk” who has an average of 94
7. A filmmaker
8. Someone known for their political columns
9. The leader of a religious group
10. The chairman of the Lit
11. A foreign person
12. A “ladies man” who possesses two motorcycles
13. A former service man
14. A “negro” providing there are “enough to go around”
15. Someone whom no one in the group had heard of, “ever”

There is no doubt that the precedents have changed and altered over the years, moving in flux with the changing patterns of the Yale student body and the political and social movements of the day. There is, however, a seeming desire to recruit both the best members (those with a high profile around campus) and a need to keep the group balanced. There are accommodations made for those who have had family in the organization before and a willingness to alter the patterns in years when suitable candidates might not present themselves. As we have not been able to look upon a similar list from recent years, we do not yet known how the recruitment criteria have changed in the last decades. However, this list of fifteen stereotypes informs us of the process of tapping and how it might

follow a predetermined route, rather than the whims of the current members. Here, we can see the precedents and the importance placed on both history and secrecy.

The Initiation Ceremony

So, now that we know just how much interest there is in what happens during the initiation of the Skull and Bones members and the extent to which they recruit the ideal members, what do we really know about the rituals and ceremonies that take place within the Tomb? The problem here is that many of the most important processes remain hidden and secret. The truth about the Skull and Bones is that the real power resides among those who have already graduated from the university, rather than those who are currently in attendance. The Order is a bond shared by Presidents, CEOs, media bosses, and many others. Through the Russell Trust Association, they own and operate the apparatus that is used to recruit the next generation of influential people. Once in the crosshairs of the Order, they are bonded together while at Yale. But in order to mark them out as potential powerbrokers of the future, they must be inducted into the Order in the correct manner. Of all the rituals that are said to happen behind closed doors, the initiation ceremony is perhaps the one about which we have the greatest amount of knowledge. Even then, it is difficult to separate verifiable fact from supposition-based fiction. If we want to learn more about the initiation ceremony, we must trust the former Bonesmen who have revealed information to the world.

The trouble with this is that they typically refuse to give their real names. While they might divulge their identity to the journalists and authors writing pieces about the Order, these names are very rarely made public. In biographies and confessional pieces by confirmed Bonesmen, many choose to remain decidedly silent about what happens within the society. So we must turn to the anonymous sources and try and piece together bits of information and use separate accounts to corroborate one another. In this regard, there is an element of trust that must be exercised. Like Rosenbaum before us, there is the pratfall awaiting anyone curious about the Skull and

Bones. But there is at least a vague comprehension of the information that we believe we can verify. If you are curious about the initiation ceremony of the Order of the Skull and Bones, the process by which some of the world's most powerful people are inducted into a secret society, then read on.

According to Lanny Davies, the initiation into the Skull and Bones was "the most harrowing" of all such ceremonies. In a review of the lore as established in the 1960s, Davies described how an initiate must face a combination of current and former members. The neophyte is alone, without friends or support. Davies's account suggests that a physical beating took place, after which the recruit was stripped naked and forced to wrestle with Bonesmen. The next part of the ceremony is one of the biggest rumors that concerns the Skull and Bones. According to these rumors – and recounted by Davies – the initiate must then lay down inside an empty coffin. Still naked, they are commanded to begin masturbating and must speak aloud their sexual history for all of the Order to hear. This type of behavior is typical for many secret societies and cults, who conduct such rituals in order to bond the recruit to the Order for as long as possible. Should they later decide to leave, this detailed sexual history added to the rumors of "deviant" rituals is thought to be enough to destroy any credibility that a person might have. Certainly, reports in Observer Life magazine during the Presidency of George W. Bush posit the idea that he might have taken place in such a practice. Examples of such behaviors can be seen in the rumored activities of Scientology, a religion that encourages new members to confess their sins and then uses this information to influence the person's future decisions. It is a means of giving up control and freedom to the group in exchange for greater power or truth. But whether it is something that takes place today is another matter. There seems little doubt among scholars of the Order of the Skull and Bones that teenage sexual braggadocio might have been common in the early days of the Order, especially mixed with the hazing one might normally expect from college societies. The adolescent nature of the recruits and current members adds weight to this, though many have sought to dispel rumors that the modern initiation is anything like what is described by Davies.

A More Modern Ceremony

Instead, the supposed modern version of the initiation ceremony is likened more to a theatre performance. One member who now works as an engineer described it as being like something from Harry Potter book. Described variously by the same witness as “goofy” and “exciting,” or intentionally scary and worrying, the effect seems to depend on the student in question. Some take it more seriously than others, while a great deal of the effectiveness of the ceremony likely comes down to which Bonesmen perform the ritual and how much conviction they are able to implement in their role. There is typically a consistency relating to things like costumes, props, and the words that are used, though each generation of Bonesmen put their own spin on the ceremony itself.

Before the ceremony takes place, the Order must ensure that they have the right tools to do the job. This means that they will need to collect the following:

1. Black ribbon
2. Black sealing wax
3. Black ink
4. Reams of red paper
5. Pins for the new members
6. The Black Book (in which the overseer records notes about the ceremony)
7. A scrapbook for the new members

The person placed in charge of the ceremony takes on the traditional title of Uncle Toby, the name given to every Bonesman who conducts the initiation ceremony on any given year. Before the ritual itself takes place, the Uncle Toby and his fellow members (plus any returning members) will rehearse the ritual and plan for the coming ceremony. Before the ritual begins, the members of the Order will venture out onto campus and travel to the confirmed recruits’ residences. Typically on a Sunday evening, this visit will involve the delivering of a red packet. The red packets are traditionally

prepared invitations containing details of when and where to meet, as well as the Skull and Bones insignia. It will be sealed with the black wax and the seal of the Order, sometimes burned using a candle. The initiation ceremony will be arranged for a short time later. Before this time, four Bonesmen will pay a visit to the new member and provide him with a formal invitation.

The delivery of the formal invitation is a ceremony within itself. Four Bonesmen will arrive at the home of the recruit. One, a guard, will check to see whether the nearest bathroom is empty. When it is, he will signal to the speaker among the group. One of the two so-called "shakers" will knock "soundly" on the recruit's door. Once the person within is correctly identified, he is grabbed by the shakers and dragged into the bathroom. The guard will shut the door behind them and ensure that no one else is able to enter. As the recruit is led into the room and forced to stand facing a corner, the speaker will announce when and where he must travel to take part in the initiation ceremony. He is told to wear no metal, Sulphur, or glass, and to knock three times upon the door of the Tomb. The recruit must remember these instructions but keep quiet. A white packet is then thrown at his feet, thought to contain a formal invitation, while the Bonesmen exit. Throughout, the recruit must stare into the wall in the corner.

Once the recruit is suitably informed, then the process of preparing the Tomb for the ritual begins under the guidance of the anointed Uncle Toby. We know that the ritual itself has changed since the early days of the Order, when the new member was dragged before "the Devil" and then struck with the flat of a sword in a twisted parallel of the tradition of knighthood. This is where the name "Knights of the Order of the Skull and Bones" derives. Before there was an official residence for the society, the ritual took place in the Sheffield Scientific School, the office of Benjamin Silliman (one of the first Order members). The modern version of the initiation differs, however, in that it has taken a more theatrical approach.

The Initiation Night

On the night when the ceremony is set to take place, as many Bonesmen as possible are gathered together. This is not only those who are currently in the Order, but also alumni who travel back to campus. Traditionally, there are at least eleven graduated members who are contacted up to a month before the evening in question. Many of the more famous members are reached out to, with the idea being to impress the new recruits and show a raw demonstration of the influence and power the groups wields. During the evening, the new recruits will be lead through every room in the Tomb, but the ritual itself will always take place in the Inner Temple. By the time the actual ceremony takes place, those involved will have rehearsed their actions to the point where they can be conducted without error. All furniture is removed from the Inner Temple, clearing space enough for all of the members apart from a number of chairs.

When a new recruit approaches the door and attempts to knock as they have been told, they will discover that the door opens before them. As soon as they step inside, a Bonesman will appear out of the darkness and thrust a hood over the unsuspecting head. The first port of call is the Firefly Room, one of the many living quarters within the building. Here, the hood is removed, only for the recruit to find themselves in the pitch-black darkness. The only things visible are the Bonesmen's lit cigarettes that float around the room, leading to the Firefly nickname. The neophyte is pushed into a chair and receives instructions. Before they can really get a grip on what else is in the room, the hood is thrown back over their head. This is when the recruit is marched from room to room, during which time they are subjected to torrents of abuse and insults from the hordes of Bonesmen who have gathered in the Tomb. Throughout, strands of the Order's history are woven into the tour, and the recruit learns about the importance of certain rooms. During this time, his hand is run along a piece of wood, which he is told is a coffin. He is made to listen to the sounds of running water, which gave birth to the idea that there might be a swimming pool in the depths of the property. Instead, the sounds are effected by the Bonesmen to confuse and disorientate the neophyte.

Inside the Inner Temple are two chairs and a table. The Bonesmen, wearing masks, move into the room in their robes. The designated Uncle Toby has a

special set of robes, while the person who is set to play the role of the Little Devil also has a distinctive outfit, resembling Satan himself. The Little Devil hides in the room, waiting. A Bonesmen with the deepest voice is selected to read and is made to dress in a Don Quixote style. One current Bonesman dresses as the Pope, taking a seat to the left of the fireplace, and perches his foot on skull carved from stone. Four of the Bonesmen are designated as shakers, usually the largest among the Order, while one person is dressed as Elihu Yale, one of the school's most important benefactors. The figure is made to sit in another chair, holding open a Greek book fixed with an upside-down pin representing the Skull and Bones. The others are there to provide a deafening noise, a disorientating sound made of clattering metals and drums. Those who have specific costumes are symbolically important, while the remainder of the group add to the atmosphere. No one in the room is identifiable as all are masked.

Once the stage is suitably set, it is time to retrieve the oath of secrecy from its resting place. Kept in a draw in the table that stays in the room, it is removed and placed on the top of the table. Next to the oath is a skull fashioned into a drinking vessel and named Yorrick after the play Hamlet. This skull is filled with a dark red liquid chosen to represent blood (though it is rarely the real thing.) This skull is then taken and placed at the foot of the Madame, before Uncle Toby announces the name of the next neophyte to join the order. As the name is announced, the masked men begin to make as much noise as possible, until the atmosphere is deafening as the hooded figure is led into the room. Soon, everyone is screaming the name of the new recruit. Shoving the neophyte to the center of the Inner Temple, his hood is ripped away just as the noise reaches a crescendo. The shakers begin to drag the recruit towards the oath on the table, and soon the chants change to "read, read, read!" From this point onwards, after reading the oath, the neophyte is bound to secrecy.

The neophyte is then grabbed by the shakers and dragged before a portrait of the goddess Eulogia. There is just enough time to look at the picture before they are again grabbed and dragged back to the table. Again, the chants sound up, demanding that they read the oath of secrecy. Once this is done, they're taken back to another picture, before returning to the table,

returning to a different picture, and so on. Each time the neophyte is placed before a new picture, the Bonesmen chant the name of the subject. Finally, the recruit is shoved down before Uncle Toby, and the room falls quiet. The robed figure reads out his full name – Uncle Toby Philamagee Phimalarlico Carnicks Carnickesi Carnickso McPherson O'Phanel – and the crowd then demands that the neophyte repeat the name back. When he cannot, there is a calamitous din, and the shakers drag the recruit away and throw him down before a picture of Judas Iscariot. The crowd chants Judas's name three times before the recruit is dragged to the feet of the Madame. Here, he must drink the 'blood' from the skull. As he does so, the Little Devil springs from his hiding place and begins to whip the recruit. The shakers once more take hold of the new member and march him to the feet of the Pope, while the Little Devil continues to whip him. The recruit must kiss the Pope's slipper, which is perched atop the stone skull. Once this is done, the neophyte moves from the Pope to Don Quixote, standing in front of the fireplace with a sword clasped in his right hand. The crowd falls silent again as the neophyte drops to his knees. Don Quixote reaches out with the sword, taps the kneeling recruit on the left shoulder, and names him as a Knight of Eulogia. Elsewhere in the room, the Tocsin is rung three times. Around the Inner Temple, all the Bonesmen take up chants of "Bones!" repeating the word over and over. As their shouts get louder, the neophyte is grabbed and taken before Elihu Yale and told to read the book open on his lap. When it becomes clear that the recruit – in the dark and astonished by the ritual – cannot read, then the crowd chants to admonish him. The shakers enter once more, pick the neophyte up, and walk him to the door of the room. From here, they are thrown into the waiting crowd who hustle and jab at the recruit. The initiation ritual, at last, is complete.

This is repeated fifteen times exactly. The only difference in the practice is the role of the recruit who is dubbed as the new Little Devil. Of all the recruits, the extant members will select one of them to take on the title. The Order's bylaws dictate that the new Little Devil's feet must never touch the ground of the Inner Temple. Accordingly, the recruit is turned upside down by the shakers and must journey through the ritual while turned the wrong way. This includes the drinking of the blood from the skull and the kissing of the Pope's foot, which must be done upside down. According to those

who have passed through the ritual, it can be equal parts exhilarating and frightening. The sensory shock of the sound, the light, and the commands can remove the weight of any expectations one might have about the Order. Until one has travelled through the ceremony and been welcomed into the society, it's probably impossible to understand exactly how the ritual feels and how it might seem to any budding new recruit.

Minor Rituals

Following this ritual, there are a number of smaller ceremonies relevant to a number of the rooms within the Tomb. One of the more important events is the time at which all of the recruits are sat down and the Patriarchs inform them about the history and the importance of the Order. This takes place in the dining room, where lessons on lore and rules are dished out. The following party lasts all of the night, welcoming the newest members of the Skull and Bones into the fold. At this point, each of the recruits is awarded their golden Skull and Bones pin, is told how the locks to the building function, is made to meet the staff of the building and the stewards, and is allowed to share in the literature specific to the Order including the Bones Bible. By this point, the guide to the rituals of the Order declares that the recruits are now officially the "new keepers of the secrets of Skull and Bones."

There are a great many rumors about the ceremonies of the Order of the Skull and Bones. There is no doubt that there are certain rituals that have not yet become public knowledge. There is a willingness from many people to believe almost all of the stories that are told about the initiation ceremony. However, the initiation ritual is hardly the crux of the Order's power. Instead, it is the entrance point for the real power that comes much later. As we will see later in the book, the members of the Order wield a disproportionate amount of power. After recruits have been sealed into the membership of the Order, they become bonded to the society for life. It engenders them with the connections and social links that can make real changes in the world. Even for those who are from a less privileged background than the rest can expect to benefit from the advantages that the

membership of the Skull and Bones brings. Not every member of the Order has gone on to achieve astonishing wealth, though a huge number of America's wealthiest families have had some contact with the Order at one point or another. There is a great fascination with the rituals of the Skull and Bones because ceremonies such as the initiation enter many people into a shared group that has members in every strata of society. Though it might seem strange and even silly at points, rituals such as these seemingly demonstrate the depth of the bond that is shared by the men and women of Skull and Bones. While traditional views of secret societies would involve authentic demon worship and traces of the truly occult and strange, the modern view of the Order is that these ceremonies are simply a starting point. Rather, their real power lies elsewhere.

The Network of the Bonesmen

It is hard to impress upon people the importance of the Order of the Skull and Bones without mentioning to them the people who have made up the membership lists of one of the United States' oldest secret societies. In this chapter, we will work through a number of the better known members of the Order and place them in a context which demonstrates their power, influence and importance. But in addition to those who are listed below, there should follow an assurance that there is always a huge number of people whose names do not make the lists. These people have been influential in their own special ways, often facilitating and helping those who are in real power. They are often lawyers, doctors, researchers, and CEOs. Those whose names might not be the most eye catching, but whose work is equally felt by the rest of society.

The discussion below is not presented in any order, but it can help to think about the legacy of the Order as a complex interweaving spider's web of power and contacts. Similarly, there will be an emphasis placed on the relationship shared between the order and the specific individuals, rather than a list of that respective individual's accomplishments. For more information on the people listed below, a wealth of information is available on the Internet. Accordingly, rather than separate the members out into

separate sections, the chapter will attempt to illustrate their connections and the ways in which the Order intersects on the lives of many people all at once.

The Bush Legacy

Perhaps the greatest interest in the Order of the Skull and Bones can be traced back to one family. While they were not involved in the creation of the society, the Bush family have been one of the most powerful families in America over the past half-century. Two generations have held the office of the President of the United States, and other members of the family have worked on many layers of the political world for decades now. As well as this, two of the most prominent members of the family, George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush (his son), are confirmed Bonesmen. Throughout their careers, their political allies, their business partners, and their rivals have all held an association with the Order. As such, the modern Bush family makes an excellent lens through which the entirety of the modern network of Bonesmen can be examined.

The first political campaign of George W. Bush took place in 1978. While running for Congress, Bush garnered a great deal of publicity about his father's involvement in the CIA, the Trilateral Commission, and both generations' involvement in Skull and Bones. An incident is described in a biography of the future president in which Mel Turner, a radio host, hosted an afternoon debate about the topic. Turner was right to the point, voicing concerns (supposedly shared by many other Texans) that the young George was somehow a tool of a shadowy government cabal. Turner went as far as to dub the politician a "tool of the eastern kingmakers." Bush, tired of being lambasted for his paternal and social connections, was adamant that there was no one out there who held the power to change his mind on any matter. After the interview was over, Bush refused to shake Turner's hand and labelled him an "asshole."

But the accusations didn't end there. Kent Hance, a Democrat, accused Bush of riding along on his "daddy's coattails," following on from

accusations of elitism. Hance was decisively victorious in the election, but it was the accusations of shadowy support that followed Bush around for decades. So much so, in fact, that George W. Bush chose to address such charges in his autobiography, labelling the accusations so random and disparate that they were "virtually impossible to refute." It was not the first time that someone from the Bush family had exhibited annoyance at these kind of rumors, as both his father and grandfather and faced similar issues. In 1966, for example, his grandfather Senator Prescott Bush had been forced to deal with the suggestion that the Senate might have been under the control of what was called an "establishment" group. According to some reports, George H. W. Bush saw his glittering Curriculum Vitae (and its inclusion of Skull and Bones) as a hindrance, causing accusations and conspiracies to follow him from job to job.

It should come as no surprise, then, to see that George W. Bush went to such lengths to distance himself from the "establishment." In fact, there is a gap of twenty years between the times when George graduated Yale and returned to the campus. He has discussed the "intellectual snobbery" that he feels surrounds the place and has described Yale as epitomizing the kind of "East Coast attitude" that he resents. When he returned again to the campus in 2001, he took the opportunity to make jokes about the school, where he was a not-particularly exceptional student. For some people, however, these constant throwbacks to his alma mater are nothing but an attempt to distance George W. Bush from the home of the Order of the Skull and Bones.

Networking

It is undeniable that one of the chief benefits of joining the organization is the networking opportunities that it presents. It brings together different types of people, as well as those who are used to wielding power. At any given time, with the induction of fifteen new members each year, there are roughly 800 living Bonesmen. For so many of them to be occupying positions of power demonstrates the advantage that this networking opportunity provides. Since its inception every President who spent time at

Yale as an undergraduate was a member of the Order. In 2004, the Presidential election pitted George W. Bush against John Kerry, another Bonesman. Though Bush won, the influence of Skull and Bones on American politics was never clearer.

But it's not just the political sphere that's felt such a big influence from Skull and Bones. One of the most obvious ways in which the Order has infiltrated a power structure is in the academic structure of Yale University. It was only until very recently that the authorities on campus were not dominated by former Bonesmen. With people in high ranking parts of the Yale infrastructure, Skull and Bones could do a lot to offer protection for their members. For example, two students faced expulsion in 1873 for below-standard results in their exams. One of the two was a member of the Order, and one was not. The Bonesman was allowed to continue his studies and retook his exam six weeks later. The other student faced a term of suspension and was restricted from retaking any exams until the following term. According to one professor (and Skull and Bones alumni), the reasoning was that this was a "special case." Such an event led the Yale magazine the Iconoclast to publish their views that Skull and Bones was the "bane" of Yale University.

Similarly, in the 1920s, the disciplining of any students at the university came under the purview of a student council. In 1928, three quarters of the council (including its chairman) were members of Skull and Bones. When a case came before them that suggested that one of their fellow society members might have been caught cheating on his exams, they were the ones who were able to determine the suitable punishment. They chose to do nothing. This decision angered the other members of the class to the extent that they formally complained to the council and demanded an answer. The students were told that, in this case, the council simply preferred not to have to make a decision. Just a year later, the student council was abandoned. With so many important people in such high ranking places of the Yale institution, Skull and Bones were able to protect their members from some of the worst punishments offered up by the university. Already, before even graduating, members were able to take advantage of the institutional privilege exercised by the Order of the Skull and Bones.

Family Histories

We have already examined the ideal selection criteria that the Order will examine when making its decisions on who to join. But just as with the manner in which the Order is capable of influencing the wider world, there have been accusations of nepotism in the recruitment of certain people. Being a family member of a noted Yale student or former Bonesman is an excellent way in which you can advance your cause for being selected. This, perhaps, is the chief reason why George W. Bush was selected. A self-confessed "C student," he was hardly the stand-out academic candidate in his class. However, both his father and grandfather had been prominent Bonesmen, Yale graduates, and politicians. It was almost predetermined that young George would be joining the society.

Prescott Bush, George W. Bush's father, benefitted hugely from his connections to the Order. At the age of thirty-one, after graduating Yale as a Bonesman, he was invited to join W. A. Harriman & Company. Owned and operated by two Bonesmen and the father of a Bonesman, the investment bank was the largest private banking institution in the United States. Prescott didn't have a huge CV, having worked for another Bonesman – Wallace Simmons – for a short while. But Prescott was one of the most active Skull and Bones alumni and often returned to the Tomb. The networking opportunities it offered were unsurpassed and allowed him to waltz into a high-paying banking position that would lay the foundation for his wealth and political power.

The man who had started the company that employed Prescott, Averell Harriman, was also a Bonesman and was awarded with a number of incredibly important positions. As well as having his name above the door on America's biggest private bank, he was later elected as the Governor of New York before taking a position as the ambassador to the USSR during the height of World War II. Speaking years later about what the Order did for him, Harriman said that it gave him purpose. Just like Prescott Bush, he took the society very seriously and was seen to venture back to the Tomb on

a number of occasions. There were suggestions that he would discuss vital national security secrets over his regular dinners at the Skull and Bones Temple, but that he would never, under any circumstances, discuss the activities of the Order with anyone but a member. He took the code of secrecy incredibly seriously. Indeed, when Harriman was moving his codified dispatches between London and Moscow during the war, he was allowed to select the combination to his diplomatic case. He chose the number 322.

Nor was Averell Harriman the first of his family to take advantage of the Skull and Bones networking opportunity. A man named Stuyvesant Fish (a Bonesman from 1905) gave Averell's father his first big job in the railroad industry. Edward Harriman, Averell's father, had attended Yale in the class preceding Fish and had been in the Order when Fish arrived. By the time of his death, it is estimated that his estate was worth some $100 million, largely built up from railroad interests. In 1904, Edward Harriman tried to influence the politics of the country, promising that he would raise campaigning money for Teddy Roosevelt on the condition that Roosevelt appoint Chauncey Depew as the ambassador to France. Depew was not only a Senator, but he was also a fellow Bonesman and a friend of the railway industry. Harriman raised the money as promised, but when Roosevelt won, he discovered that the President was going to renege on the deal. To try and reconcile things between himself and the President, Harriman dispatched an intermediary, naturally a Bonesman, named Maxwell Evarts. At all times, those Harriman elevated and trusted the most were the people who shared their membership in a secret society from the Yale campus.

Even the formation of W. A. Harriman and Company was made possible through the connections gardened at the Order of the Skull and Bones. The firm was founded thanks to financial backing from Percy Rockefeller, a Bonesman in 1900 and part of one of the richest American families of all time. Added to this one bank, Averell Harriman was able to convince Percy to invest in a number of other ventures, such as a burgeoning aerospace business that belonged to Averell's brother-in-law. When seeking out good employees, the Harriman family often turned to Yale graduates and showed

particular favor to those who had been in the Order. All across the country, many large and powerful firms were being run in exactly the same manner. The connections that one made while a member of the Yale Skull and Bones society could provide lasting employment at the very top of the American business pyramid. Often, Bonesmen would specifically seek out and trust one another when populating their companies with employees. Slowly, many of America's most important institutions – politics, universities, and business – became another networking opportunity for the Order of the Skull and Bones. And it is a legacy that has continued to this day. The modern iterations of Harriman's bank – Brown Brothers Harriman and Company – had nine of their twenty-six partners as alumni of the Order as recently as 1972, while the chairman himself – Frederick Allen – was a member in 1900.

Pre-University Days

Even before arriving at Yale, it is possible for Skull and Bones to have an influence over a person's life, especially for those who have previously had family members in the Order. Taking the Bush family again as an example, it's possible to see the connections to the Order affecting a person's life. There is a story from the military days of George H. W. Bush, who was serving in the Pacific during the World War II. It was the 2nd of September, 1944, and George was the lieutenant of a flight crew who had just received orders to destroy a radio installation located in Chichi-jima. Before they set off, George was approached by a man who had been in the Order two years previously. Knowing that George had ties to Skull and Bones, he plead to be taken along on the mission despite his lack of experience. Ted White, as he was known, was a gunnery officer and replaced his equivalent Leo Nadeau during the mission after getting approval from Bush and his commanding officer. The mission went wrong, however, with the Japanese shooting down the plane. Bush, managing to send the explosion payload before ejecting, was dismayed to learn that Ted White had been killed in the mission.

It was three years later when George H. W. Bush was telling the story to a captive room. Inside the Tomb, George told his new society mates about how he had encountered a Bonesman before and how it had ended in tragedy. According to reports from the night, Bush was regretful that he ever "let him go" and wished he hadn't allowed White along on the mission. To those in the room that night, it seemed as though there was a sense of real anguish in the new recruit's face. It was that year that George, as the son of Prescott Bush, was receiving the honor of being the last (and most important) tap. Having already been deeply affected by the death of a fellow Bonesman, Bush was now on the inside and ready to start fostering the relationships that would suit him so well later in life. It wouldn't be long before his connections within the Order were cemented. Alexander Ellis would go on to become an insurance executive and would be the roommate of John H. Chafee, a future senator. Ellis would marry Nancy, George's sister. Along with James L. Buckley (another future senator), George and Chafee would be the ushers at the wedding.

In fact, George H. W. Bush's life just after graduation can give a fantastic insight into the extent to which Skull and Bones connections can facilitate success and power within those who join. Straight after leaving Yale, Prescott Bush was prepared to break the rule against nepotism that had been implemented in the Brown Brothers Harriman bank and wanted to offer his son a job. George turned them down, however, as well as refusing a job with his uncle, George Herbert Walker (a Bonesman in 1927). On the suggestion of his father, he turned to another former Order member, Neil Mallon, who had been placed as the president of Dresser Industries by Roland Harriman at the suggestion of Prescott. The company worked with oil in the Southwest of the United States, and George was hired as the only trainee that year, supposedly on the promise that he'd have the chance to run the company someday. Bush spent years under the tutelage of Mallon, to the point where he would eventually name a son, Neil, after his mentor. Even for a Yale graduate, the chances laid out in front of George H. W. Bush when he left university offered him untold fortune and power. He could have worked in finance, investment banking, or a multitude of other industries – essentially, anywhere the Bonesmen held influence. Being able to turn so many excellent opportunities down demonstrates the capabilities

of the Order of the Skull and Bones when it comes to putting people in positions of power. If you possess the right connections, then it is possible to get an incredible head start in some of the country's most powerful industries. When it came time for George to start his own oil business, it was former members he turned to in order to raise the requisite funds. Even at a lower level, there were less successful Bonesmen who were encouraged to invest sums such as $40,000, enough to buy a home in 1952. From the very top down, members of the Order of the Skull and Bones were able to take care of one another.

This was particularly useful when George H. W. Bush decided to run for President. Having been in the office of Vice-President for a number of years, he had remained close to the fellow members of Skull and Bones. He held regular dinners with those from his graduation year, as well as other members of the Order who were occasionally invited. It was to these groups that Bush announced the difficulties he felt he faced as Vice-President, as well as the worries he held about running for the big office. But it was the Bonesmen who raised a great deal of money to fund his campaign. One member, William Judkins Clark, raised $400,000 all by himself, a huge amount at the time.

Loading the Deck

When he did win the Presidency, Bush held no qualms about stocking many of the best positions with former Skull and Bones men, as well as doing political favors for those who were aligned with the Order. Frederick Smith had been a member of the Order of the Skull and Bones in 1966 and had gone on to found Federal Express, one of America's biggest companies. He had headed up a group of the top 100 business people in America and had pledged their support to the Bush presidency. This favor was returned once George was in office, with FedEx receiving the highest honor that can be bestowed upon an American business, the Malcolm Bridge Quality Award (which is actually named for the son of another Bonesman.) Of the Bonesmen Bush appointed, George H. Pfau became the director of a department named the Securities Investor Protection Corporation; Richard

Anthony Moore became the Ambassador to the Republic of Ireland; and Paul Lambert (utterly lacking in any diplomacy experience) became the Ambassador to Ecuador. All of them had been members of the Order of the Skull and Bones. Furthermore, David George Ball became Assistant Secretary of Labor, Christopher Buckley became Bush's chief speechwriter, James T. Hempill joined the Department of the Interior, David Grimes became a representative of Bush during some key foreign trips, Thomas W. Mosely formed part of the delegation to Uruguay, Edward McNally wrote some of Bush's most famous speeches, and Raymond Price was awarded the job of writing Bush's speech to the Republican National Convention in 1992. Bush wasn't just giving Bonesmen posts in business and overseas, they were forming key parts of his government. Even in the CIA (where George spent time working), there were a disproportional number of Yale graduates, to the extent that members of the other agencies referred to their agents as "Yalies." Of course, among the most important assignments were those with close ties to the Order.

Listing the full extent of Skull and Bones appointments during the Bush administration would take up a huge portion of this book. Suffice it to say, Bonesmen were more than represented throughout the annals of the government, especially when you consider the fact mentioned earlier, that there were typically only 800 living Bonesmen at any one time. This is perhaps the best example of the spider web of Skull and Bones networking that we have today. Though there are further examples to be found in the world of business, media, and law, the presidency of George H. W. Bush is a fine example of the extent to which the Order of the Skull and Bones infiltrated the government. The extent to which Bonesmen were involved in the administration during this time became an open secret. It was known to most everyone who paid attention, but few dared to mention it. Perhaps this is why, by the time the Internet had risen to power and George W. Bush sought the same office, he went to great lengths to distance himself from the accusations that had trailed his father. The son has worked hard to keep himself from the accusations that have followed his father around for decades. But that ignores several salient facts. Firstly, thanks to efforts by people such as the senior George Bush, there is already in place in the government of the United States a heavy influence of those with ties to

Skull and Bones. Secondly, the emergence of the World Wide Web of information – the Internet – means that it is now possible to track and trace the movements of those who are in the Order. While previously the existence of the Order was known as well as some of its members, it was difficult to disseminate this information quickly. This has not been possible, and it could be that the Order is either struggling to come to terms with this prevalence of information or (more likely) they have simply taken a greater degree of secrecy to their actions. For example, as of 2015, Austan Goolsbee has been appointed as staff director chief economist to the Economic Recovery Advisory Board started by Barack Obama, who did not attend Yale. James Emanuel Boasberg is a judge for the United States District Court for the District of Columbia. Edward S. Lampert is the chairman of Sears and Kmart. Even Academy Award nominated actor Paul Giamatti is a Bonesman. What is markedly different from the previous eras is the extent to which this information is offered much less freely. These days, one of the most famous secret societies seems to be retreating back into their more secretive past.

But despite this commitment to secrecy, the legends of the Order of the Skull and Bones have been passed down from generation to generation. It seems that, while the networking system is still in place, there is a growth in the number of theories that relate to Skull and Bones. In the next chapter, we will examine some of the most common legends, from world domination to campus pranks. Now that we have established just how real and far-reaching the network of Skull and Bones members has become, it lends credence to some of the most extreme rumors.

The Legends of the Order

Ask anyone on campus which is the strictest of all the Yale societies, and they'll give you the same answer: Skull and Bones. These rules have been misinterpreted and misconstrued over time, giving rise to some of the strangest rumors about the group. For example, an old bylaw seems to suggest that all Bonesmen must exit a room should someone utter the words "Skull and Bones" or the number "322." The legend of the rule was largely established in a novel – *Saving the Queen* by William F. Buckley – and is backed up by hearsay and whisperings, especially by those who attended the university in the 1960s. It's been a Harvard legend that all that was required to beat their academic rivals at football was to take to the field, say the name of the society, and watch half the team exit the pitch. The legend stuck so much that during the 1988 elections, a group of reporters attempted to see what George Bush would do when he heard the name of the Order. He did nothing. Some legends, it seems, are simply exaggerated, even if they do have their roots in the truth.

Strange Rumors

It seems that some of the rules and stories surrounding the legends of the Skull and Bones are now archaic. Previously, they were designed to offer some sort of protection or benefit, though they do not make as much sense in the modern world. Much like the human appendix (a carryover from earlier evolutionary times), these rules have outlived their true usefulness, though they continue to exist within each generation of Bonesmen. For example, the above rule might well have been a means of discouraging discussions about the society in the presence of non-members. Over time, the rule was misinterpreted by the public, and its purpose was altered in the minds of those who were not members. Some of the members still held to the rules and traditions out of nostalgia and respect, while others recognized rules such as this one as having outlived its purpose. A similar rule suggests that Bonesmen should not enter the Tomb in the presence of witnesses. Previous generations might have been able to look over their shoulders for

human eyes, but in the modern age of electronic surveillance, this is almost impossible. Accordingly, adherence to the rule has fallen slightly by the wayside.

One rule that has continued, however, and led to the birth of many of the stranger tales of the Order, relates to the names given to members. When a person joins Skull and Bones, they are given a new name on their first day. Once this name is handed out, it will be used by the Bonesmen exclusively for the remainder of their lives. It is possible for a member to pass on a name to the new generation of recruits, a tradition that has occurred many times, and helps to bond the new Bonesmen to life within the society and within the walls of the Tomb. Certain nicknames within the group have certain connotations and are handed out accordingly. For example, the name "Magog" is given to the recruit deemed to be the most successful in their romantic endeavors, while "Gog" refers to the least successful. The tallest of the Bonesmen is named "Long Devil," while anyone who captains the Yale varsity football team is named "Boaz." "Little Devil" – the person so involved in the initiation ceremony – is the name given to the shortest member of the order. For everyone else, a name is chosen at the members own discretion. In addition, Magog and Gog are allowed to select new names should they wish.

For an example of the naming traditions in action, we should look to George W. Bush. While the world might know him by one name, Skull and Bones members know him as Temporary. According to the legends from within the Tomb, it was a name he selected on the spur of the moment and never got around to changing. If we look back a little further, rumors suggest that Temporary's father went under the title of Magog, though he was already married by the time he passed through the initiation ceremony. The title of Magog for George Bush Snr is a point of contention, however, with some Bonesmen being adamant that his nickname had been "Barebones." Whether this was hastily reworked following George's burgeoning political career or whether it's the actual name Bush selected for himself, we do not know. When looking through the archives of Skull and Bones documents that have surfaced, however, it seems that Prescott Bush was named Barebones and that this name might well have passed along the

generations. However, this would lead to a question about why the junior George Bush did not inherit the title. It's a question that, like many of the Bones names, leaves the audience with nothing but further questions.

We do know the names of several of the more famous Magogs. William Howard Taft, Robert Taft (his son), and Don Schollander all bore the title. In addition, we know that F. O. Mathiessen and Amos Alonzo Stagg were both Little Devils. Details such as these hint at the reams of unknown information we have about the Order. In addition, the names themselves serve a particular function. They provide an immediate point of familiarity and discussion for Bonesmen across different generations. When requesting a favor from a fellow Bonesman, being able to use his secret name adds a touch of familiarity and trust that is not permitted to those not in the Order.

Just like the awarding of names, the title of Uncle Toby is something that is frequently misunderstood by those who are not a part of the Order. While most college societies will elect a permanent leader, Skull and Bones allows its members to take turns at assuming the role of Uncle Toby. As already discussed, the person with this title will lead the ceremonies and rituals and will also chair debates, takes notes during discussions, and typically is allowed to have the last say on anything that pertains to the society itself. This way, power is spread out among the members. Similarly, the seniors in the Order are overseen by the former members who sit on the Russell Trust Association's governing board. This board elects a President of the Society and a Treasurer, as well as the more idiosyncratic Corporal Trim (who is in charge of menus), the Secretary of the Eulogian Club (who liaises with the alumni), and the Commissary, who manages society business interests. The Secretary of the Eulogian Club sits to the right of Uncle Toby, and the Commissary sits nearest to the door. While it might seem as though the president of the society is the de facto leader or that Uncle Toby might take on that role, true power in fact resides with the Secretary of the Eulogian Club. During the 19th Century, this position had the power of veto and could approve business related to the Order. The Little Devil is equally important, as he sits to the left of Uncle Toby and is in charge of collecting any fines from members. Many of the names handed out in this manner can be traced

back to the novel Tristram Shandy, where characters such as Uncle Toby and Corporal Trim feature.

These smaller rules give an example of what life might be like within the walls of the Tomb. There are other flights of fancy, such as the fact that the schedule runs on Skull and Bones Time (five minutes faster than real time), and students use their own annual calendar. But these actions typically lack far-reaching ramifications beyond the Yale campus. They might seem strange to those unfamiliar with the American academic system, but they are not entirely uncommon. However, they certainly add to the strangeness that permeates the Order. It is this uncanny appearance, coupled with the type of individuals who are involved, that gives rise to many of the theories that exist about Skull and Bones. In fact, there is an intersection between the ideas of the standard college society and the theory of a global conspiracy that can be found in the regular alumni dinners. At these events, some of the world's most powerful people are invited to rub shoulders and talk with their fellow graduates and Bonesmen. But what actually happens at these events?

Face to Face

Typically, there are two meetings a year when the alumni are invited to the Tomb. One takes place in the winter, while the other occurs close to the Yale commencement. Before each event, every living Bonesman will receive a printed invitation. Close to these dinners are the times for the official meetings of the Russell Trust Association. The more important of the two is typically regarded as the one nearest commencement, usually taking place around spring time, and the invitation to this dinner will include the list of the newest Skull and Bones members. The invitations themselves (as with all communications from the Order) arrive in black edged envelopes closed with the Skull and Bones seal. Those who cannot make it to the dinner will often provide information about their activities, in order that the society can update their records on the whereabouts of alumni. Thus far, apart from the slightly morbid aesthetics, the dinners seem like many other gatherings of university societies.

The dinners themselves are typically lavish. Including a large number of courses overseen by a number of chefs, the meal is usually followed by the smoking of cigars. In all, it seems as though the Tomb transforms into a high-class restaurant for the night. One noticeable absence, however, is alcohol. Forbidden on Skull and Bones property, the society is traditionally teetotal at all times. The rule seems designed to ensure all members remain as levelheaded as possible during their meetings, though it is said that the presence of the goddess Eulogia should be enough to act as a form of social lubricant. There have been a few exceptions, however, usually involving very fine wines. At the 1836 Christmas function, for example, two special bottles were sealed away to be enjoyed on the centenary anniversary. Despite the intent, the opening of the Tomb was seen as a special enough occasion, so they members uncorked the saved bottles several decades early and celebrated their new home in style.

Perhaps the most important part of the dinners comes at the end. While other campus societies might invite guest speakers, the only people permitted within the walls of the Tomb are Bonesmen and servants who have been bound to secrecy. As such, the only guest speakers are those who have been initiated into the Order. They discuss with those present how Skull and Bones has shaped them, helped them, and changed their lives. But the levels of secrecy that are present at these events often mean that those who are talking can do so with a degree of candor not permitted at many speaking events. McGeorge Bundy, for example, was the National Security Advisor from 1961 to 1966, serving under two Presidents. During his after-dinner speech in 1968, he took advantage of the frank and relaxed forum to speak about political figures and foreign policy without fear of his words being spread further than the Tomb. To some extent, he was right. While we know that he discussed many important subjects and discussed very privileged information with the Bonesmen, not one of them has seen fit to reveal the actual content of his conversation. This oath to secrecy on such matters is one of the bedrocks of the success of the Order, while the ability to divulge such information means that Bonesmen often have access to the very best intelligence simply by dint of association. Other speakers have

included George H. W. Bush and Tex McCray, who discussed his actions during the Nixon-Khrushchev debate.

Such events are not cheap. While the attendance of the Bonesmen is free, the lavish dinners and hiring of servants is most certainly not. Add to this the upkeep and maintenance of the Skull and Bones facilities, the writing of letters and arrangements, as well as the commissioning of regular "Bones Bibles" (historical accounts of the society by members) and one is looking at a hefty price. While there are a great many members from privileged backgrounds who could undoubtedly pay their way through the Order, members are not expected to pay any dues. Instead, funding is taken from regular donations. Each year, every Bonesman receives a letter from the treasurer that requests a voluntary contribution. Such a letter might remind the Bonesman of whom they are required to pay (the Russell Trust Association) and what their last donation amounted to. While it might not seem the best means of funding, it has worked. It is thought that by the end of the 20th Century, the Order had gathered an endowment amounting to around $3million. According to the tax returns filed by the Russell Trust Association in 1997, the group's assets totaled close to $4.3million, though this shrank in the following year. Typically, the Russell Trust can expect revenues of around $750,000, with around 15% of that coming from donations. The rest can be derived from the various business interests and fundraising events held by the society.

Another key difference marking Skull and Bones out from their rival societies is the manner in which they use their wealth. Typically, societies, groups, and clubs at Yale and other universities will be known to use any money they raise to both fund themselves and to help out in the communities where they are based. This is not true for Skull and Bones. Instead, the group uses its large resources to fund its members and serve their interests "to varying degrees." In contrast, Scroll and Key – Skull and Bones' rival secret society on the Yale campus – provide a number of grants and fellowships totaling many thousands of dollars. Described by one Bonesman as being a "pretty self-serving" society, the approach is not intended to be dark or evil. Rather, it is intended to be just another way by which Skull and Bones marks itself out as different from other groups.

Money from the Order rarely leaves the coffers of the Russell Trust, instead being used to pay for the upkeep and the lifestyle of the members. There is a rumor that one year, a certain unnamed Bonesman amassed a large number of drug-related debts, which he paid for by stealing a valuable rug from the organization. He sold it, and the Order used their resources to replace it. As well as this, many have suggested that there is a graduation gift given out by the society amounting to $15,000. When discussing the matter, however, one member (who graduated in 1968) mentioned that, if it were true, he was still waiting to see his gift.

While these stories have been told many times about Skull and Bones, there are a great many rumors and theories that are far more serious and move beyond simple collusion. One accusation, for example, is that Skull and Bones can be considered an anti-Semitic organization. However, there are certain flaws to this theory that has, in the age of the Internet, been commonly accepted by many. When looking closer, it seems as though the Order has counted among its number a great many members who dislike the Jewish people, though there is little to point towards the Order itself being prejudiced against them as an institution. When we look through the documented history, for example, we can uncover a letter written from Robert Nelson Corwin to Frederick Jones in 1922. The former was the Chairman of the Yale's Board of Admissions, while the latter was the Dean. Both were Bonesmen. In the letter, Corwin advocates there being a quota placed on the number of Jewish students that Yale can enroll in any given year. It contained with it an analysis of the situation concerning a seeming increase in the "students of Jewish birth," and after Jones agreed that there was such an issue, the university introduced a quota. This is backed up by the diary entries of another Bonesman, Farwell Knapp, who visited Jones later that year. In the diary, Knapp acknowledges that Jones "hates Jews," though he believes that Jones is usually impartial on such matters. Knapp discusses the efforts that have been made to reduce the number of Jewish students who hold important scholarships, and after noting that he also happens to "dislike Jews," says that he agrees with the policy. Just six months later, another diary entry suggests that the only means of dealing with the "Jewish problem" is to place trust in the actions of the Ku Klux Klan. Among those occupying high-ranking positions in the university

infrastructure, many were Bonesmen and many were anti-Semites. Drawing a correlation – suggesting that it was Skull and Bones which made them thus – can be disingenuous, however, as there is little written into the actual society bylaws concerning such matters.

Crooking

Another of the more salacious rumors that circulates regarding the Order is their involvement in a number of thefts occurring around campus and beyond. Though not quite as serious as the allegations of anti-Semitism, the suggestions that Bonesmen may have stolen a number of items certainly have a great deal more credibility and these stories are accepted as truth by many people. For a long time, the moment any item of importance went missing around Yale, it was assumed that Skull and Bones will have played a part in acquiring it. The fact that non-members are prevented from entering the Tomb (a ban which includes, it is rumored, the police), the building is treated as something of a trophy cabinet for the successful heists that are conducted by the Order. These stolen items – tributes to Eulogia – have ranged from relatively minor items that are somehow connected to Yale's history to actual items of historical importance. For example, it is said that Skull and Bones have in their possession the gong which previously hung in the Treasurer's offices of the Old College, a drum from the same building, a bell taken from an East Haven church, one of the Old College's flags, and pins stolen from every single secret society that had sprung up on campus during the Order's lifetime.

The Skull of Geronimo

But there are other items that are reportedly in the possession of the Order of the Skull and Bones that would involve a far more serious accusation. One such item is the skull of Apache tribe leader Geronimo. During the 1980s, there was a concerted effort on behalf of Geronimo's modern-day descendants to find the remains of the man who went to war with the early Americans. At first, it seemed as though all of the remains had been buried in Oklahoma, inside Fort Still. Though this was the commonly accepted

story of where the remains had been placed, as investigations deepened, the man tasked with finding the bones of Geronimo received a letter. Supposedly from a Bonesman, it presented the theory that the remains were not in Oklahoma, but in New Haven. Should the investigator wish to learn more, photographs could be made available. The photographs arrived and depicted both the Tomb and a glass display cabinet that contained a number of small items (stirrups, bone fragments) and – it was claimed – the skull of Geronimo himself. In addition to this, there was a written account of how it came to be in the Order's possession.

Back in 1918, a group of Bonesmen – including Prescott Bush – journeyed to Fort Still. Aware of how bad it would look should such prominent figures be caught grave robbing, they made sure to keep quiet while they dug up the remains. Two dug, two rested, and two men stood guard. Slowly, as they dug deeper, they began to uncover a saddle horn, then some rotten items of clothing, and then finally, at the very bottom of the grave, they came across the skull itself. They quickly filled the grave back in and sped back to their lodgings nearby. There, they cleaned and polished the skull. With their trophy, the Bonesmen travelled back to Yale and placed the skull of Geronimo on display.

On learning this, the investigator journeyed back to Fort Still to discern whether there was any truth to the matter. According to reports, a number of personal items had indeed been taken from the grave. The unnamed Bonesman was contacted again, and he invited the investigators to campus for a tour of the sites related to the theft. The man was clearly concerned, insisting on walking sixty feet ahead of the investigators, so as not to be associated with them. The Bonesman grew increasingly paranoid and according to the investigators, believed that people were rummaging through his garbage searching for clues. Eventually, the Bonesman vanished and went on the run.

To take matters further, the investigators and their legal team set up a meeting with Jonathan Bush, a Bonesman and brother of George H. W. Bush. The meeting took place in New York City and lasted less than an hour. Showing Bush the photographs and asking that the skull be returned

in order to receive a peaceful burial, the investigators quickly realized that any genuine interest Skull and Bones had in helping them was beginning to evaporate. Though Bush promised the investigators that he would help them get what they wanted, they discovered that he was impossible to contact in the days following the meeting. It was eleven days before they could arrange another meeting. This time, Bush was accompanied by a number of other Bonesmen. They had brought with them a display case, the very same from the photographs, which contained the smaller items and the skull itself. This was given to the investigators, who remained suspicious. The skull was slightly different, though it was hard to tell why.

Taking the display case away, the investigators decided that they would need to have it analyzed. Though they found that it was actually the skull of a human, the results proved that it was actually the skull belonging to a boy aged ten years old. Added to that, it was not nearly old enough to have belonged to Geronimo. The Bonesmen tried to have the investigators sign a document that absolved them of possessing the skull. When the investigators refused and handed back the display case, they travelled back to Arizona and exercised their one remaining course of action. They asked their Senator – John McCain – to personally contact George Bush and request the return of the actual skull. After a short time, McCain responded to say that Bush would take none of his calls. To this day, the display case is kept in the Tomb. There is still a skull inside, though whether it is Geronimo's or the one belonging to the little boy, we will never know. The Bonesmen, however, still refer to the skull as Geronimo.

There is a similar story relating to the skull of Pancho Villa. A story purports that a group of Bonesmen paid a solider in the 1920s almost $25,000 to steal the skull of the Mexican leader. This is roundly denied, however, and there are reports mentioning Villa's skull inside the Tomb. Far more accurate are those that supposedly relate to the theft of the gravestone of Elihu Yale. Those who have been inside the Tomb have seen the gravestone (or an incredibly expensive, accurate replica), which is displayed alongside a note revealing that it was taken from Wrexham Church Yard. Elihu himself held a lot of ties to Wrexham, a small village in Wales, and when it was reported that the gravestone had been stolen from

their churchyard, the locals requested that it be returned. The requests were ignored, and the stone remains in the Tomb to this day.

This kind of stealing is not only accepted among the Bonesmen, but it is actively encouraged. Known as "crooking," the act of stealing something from around campus or beyond is part of becoming a legitimate Bonesman. These items are then returned to the Tomb and displayed next to a small plaque which records when and who "crooked" the item. As long as there is space in the Tomb, it seems that the Bonesmen will continue to steal and pilfer.

Widespread Influence

But a far more serious claim relates to the hold Skull and Bones has over the press. For many years, the process of tapping new recruits would always include those who held the editorial positions on the student newspapers. Almost always, those in charge of the various Yale publications would have some link to Skull and Bones, which allowed them to dictate how they were presented in the press. Ever since the tail end of the 20th Century, however, this has ceased to be the case. Nowadays, the proliferation of the Internet makes it much harder to control what is published. Accordingly, very few of Yale's editors are now tapped by the Order. But their hold has always gone far beyond the campus boundaries. For example, two of America's biggest news magazines were founded by Bonesmen. Time magazine was supposedly conceived within the walls of the Tomb itself, with some saying that meetings from the 1920s will contain mentions of the magazine in the society's minutes. In addition, Today magazine was founded by Averell Harriman, merging with another publication to become Newsweek. On a number of occasions, Harriman is known to have stepped in and strong-armed the editorial team of his publications in reaction to favors and requests from fellow Bonesmen.

Other serious claims against the Bonesmen relate to their closed-door policy of admittance. We have already mentioned anti-Semitism, but for many years there was a refusal to allow the recruitment of female members. Even many decades after Yale became co-ed, Skull and Bones did not

change their rules until 1991. Even today, there are alumni who regret this change in rules. It caused a great deal of consternation in 1971 when the idea was first floated. That class – now known in Skull and Bones history as the "bad club" – suggested that women might be admitted. Though the decision was accepted within the Tomb, the alumni were furious. The bad club were invited to dinner with fifty alumni as a French restaurant in New York. Some of the most prestigious members of the Order were present. It was impressed upon the group that since the alumni paid the bills of the society, they would have the final say. There was little in the way of argument, and nearly half of the bad club stormed out of the restaurant. In fact, up until 1991, the closest any woman could get to becoming a member would be to marry a Bonesman, in which case there was a special wedding ceremony for the happy couple. The little we know about such a ceremony comes from the sister-in-law of one Bonesman who snuck in. She reports hooded cloaks, coffins, strange incantations, and references to ghosts.

The process of accepting women was still difficult in 1991. The alumni changed the locks on the Tomb, and the Bonesmen of that year had to contact lawyers. It was finally put to a vote among the near-800 living members. It passed by a slim margin. Just before the initiation ceremonies, William F. Buckley led a group of alumni to get a court order restricting the Order's recruitment of the six woman (and nine men) who had been tapped. Another vote was held. Though it was a secret ballot, we know that John Kerry and David Boren (both Senators) voted in favor of recruiting women. Likewise, we don't know how either George Bush or his son voted, though George W. might well have revealed himself when speaking to a PBS producer many years later, confessing that he felt the group has lost its way since they began to admit women. The decision has led to a split among the alumni. Many now choose to disassociate themselves from the Order, while others are still bitter about the decision.

It has often been said that learning the secrets of the Order of the Skull and Bones can appear as something of a disappointment. For many, the inclination is to believe that it is a shadowy cabal run by the world's most powerful men. But at its heart, Skull and Bones is still very much a student society. It is run by young men (and now women) who usually hail from

privileged backgrounds. At that age, they are far more likely to lean towards the typical hedonism expected of young people than the ruthless world domination thrust upon them by the many conspiracy theorists who learn about the club.

The Real Secrets?

So what are the real secrets of the Order of the Skull and Bones? In a book such as this – one which attempts to show the truth behind the rumors and deal in confirmed facts – the real secrets might never be held within the walls of the Tomb. It can help to think about the society much like an incubation chamber. At one of the country's most prestigious schools, a selection of the most privileged and brightest individuals continually recruit and bond with the next generation. In doing so, they create a structured web of power, a training ground for the networking of the elite that will help them so much in the world beyond Yale. It is true that Skull and Bones has entertained some of the most powerful people of the 19th, 20th, and 21st Centuries, but in doing so, it has provided them with a means to seize their power. The schism in the society on issues such as female admission demonstrates that there is not one single hive mind that is used to make a decision. Instead, the real power of Skull and Bones can be found in the trust it builds among members, the way in which its alumni have infiltrated the most powerful positions in the country, and the way in which it perpetuates the continuation of power being shared among the elite. Should you be a member of Skull and Bones, you will not learn the secrets of some mysterious New World Order. Instead, however, you might become a key figure in the real machinations that run the country, allowing you to glimpse and perhaps even grasp real power, all thanks to your involvement with a strange university society. The real secret of the Order of the Skull and Bones is that it is little more than smoke and mirrors. The real secret and the real power lie in what its alumni do with their connections and how it allows them to slide so seamlessly into the framework of control possessed by the United States of America.

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Conclusion

There is no doubt that the Order of the Skull and Bones is one of the most important secret societies in the world. Unlike many such groups, it actually exists. Along with the Russell Trust Association, there is a real-world paper trail and physical evidence that points towards not only the society itself existing, but its membership including some of the most important people of the last two centuries. When compared to supposed societies such as the Illuminati, there is no question as to which group is more credible.

But many of the stories about Skull and Bones are seemingly just smoke and mirrors. The pagan rituals, the goddess worship, the morbid aesthetic, and the perpetual rumors that surround the society serve to distract the world from the cold, hard truth. As long as everyone believes it to be nothing more than a slightly silly, slightly archaic group, then there will be little attention paid to the fact that they have so successfully held sway over so many important industries within America.

They are a networking group, a means of picking and selecting their successors and placing them into positions of power. Skull and Bones is a proving ground for the next generation of power players, allowing the Bonesmen to evaluate and condition Yale graduates before awarding them a great deal of influence over society. It is nepotistic, reactionary, conservative, and – to the outside eye – very strange indeed. But there is no question as to whether they truly wield power. Thanks to the secretive nature of Skull and Bones, we may never know the true extent of their influence. But as we have seen behind the doors of the Tomb, we can accept that we must look further out into the real world if we are to see their real influence. The real mysteries of the Order of the Skull and Bones do not hide inside the Tomb. Instead, they are all around us.

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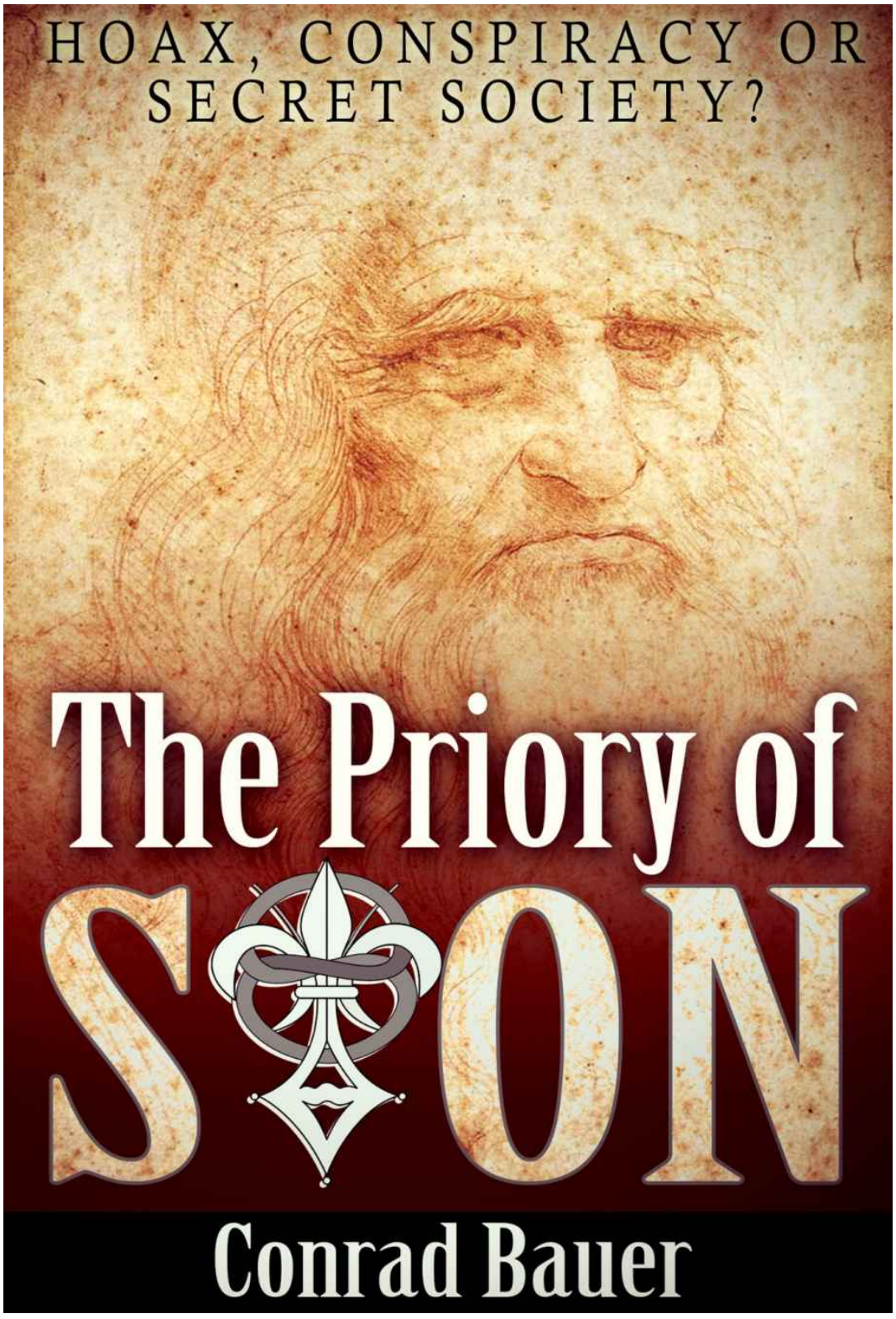
HOAX, CONSPIRACY OR SECRET SOCIETY?
The Priory of SION
Conrad Bauer

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Introduction

Hoax, conspiracy, or secret society? That is the range of responses you might hear when raising the idea of the Priory of Sion. Ostensibly a clandestine order designed to disguise the truth about the children of Jesus Christ, the group have been labeled as either an elaborate concoction, or the most powerful secret society in the world. Are they real? What are they hiding? Where did they come from? What impact can they have on the world around us? These are the questions this book will hope to answer.

At the heart of the story of the Priory of Sion is the somewhat heretical notion that Jesus Christ — the supposed son of God — fathered children. Not only that, but that his bloodline survives to this day. If true, the idea has a huge impact on the very existence of Christianity, the world's most popular religion. If the Priory — as is believed — are guarding the truth about such a matter, they then potentially control some of the most powerful information in the world. Think of it like an ideological atomic bomb, ticking away and ready to explode through the consciousness of the world.

Not only that, but the men allegedly chosen to guard these secrets rank as some of the greatest thinkers in human history. Isaac Newton, Nicholas Flamel, and Leonardo da Vinci have all been implicated in the order, though their involvement is debated. In fact, the entire existence of the order has been argued. Some suggest that, rather than a secret society, the Priory is in fact an elaborate hoax.

Others claim that these accusations are merely an attempt to disguise the truth. But what do we know for certain? Who exactly are the Priory of Sion?

Hidden Evidence

One of the most important parts of this story is a battle. On one side is an American, pressed into defending himself. On the other side, three Englishmen stand convinced that they have been robbed and their ideas made to seem ridiculous. It is as though their honor has been sullied. They demand satisfaction. Each side is spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to face off against the other and it will not be settled until one side emerges victorious. But rather than some medieval fist fight or Victorian duel, this is a very recent battle. Though the history of the Priory of Sion is said to stretch back for thousands of years, this fight was fought after the turn of the second millennium. The venue is the Royal Courts of Justice in a part of London known as the Strand. The date is 2006.

This is where we will start. These days, it is impossible to discuss the Priory of Sion without mentioning a number of books. These books vary in popularity, from an international bestseller which made its author millions, through to a supposedly academic work which defied expectations and left a print on the world, and finally, an obscure French text, one which many people have credited with starting this entire affair. Appropriately enough for a story that may or may not be true, the publishing of books is inextricably linked to the Priory in every single respect. As we shall see, the writing, the reading, and the impact of these texts is essential to the story.

Of these books, two were written by the men who stood opposed to one another in the Strand. On one side was Dan Brown, writer of *The Da Vinci Code*, and the man often credited with turning the Priory of Sion into a global concern. Condemned by the Church, ridiculed by critics, his work has nevertheless proved to be a success beyond any comprehension. For the university professor, it has become a rich industry. As someone who teaches other to write, there are few people in the world better placed to tell others how to make money from a story. But how that story came to be is the entire predicament of the court case.

On the other side of the courtroom stand two men and their team of lawyers. Richard Leigh, hailing from New Jersey, and Michael Baigent, hailing from New Zealand. They glower at Dan Brown (who, strangely enough, hails from New Hampshire) from the other side of Court 61. Dan Brown is the defendant and the other two men have accused him of plagiarism. Brown, they say, not only stole their ideas, but presented them to the world in a way which discredited the work they had done. Baigent and Leigh are better known to the world as the authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. As well as being one of the most popular pieces of writing ever created on the subject of the Holy Grail, their book brings the idea of the Priory of Sion to an English-speaking audience. As we will discover soon, their work was wildly successful and few writers have come as close to delivering as ground-breaking, as controversial, and as profitable a take on religion in the last three centuries.

And so both sides of the courtroom are inhabited by writers. On this day, a verdict is to be reached which will lend credence to (or demolish the credibility of) an idea which is said to date back almost 2,000 years. At the heart of the matter, with the judge set to rule, is the purported existence of the Priory of Sion. Through the works of both sides of the argument, the Priory's name has reached more ears than anyone ever thought possible. While Brown has managed to dominate the bestseller charts in the world of fiction, Baigent and Leigh (as well as a third author who is not present, but who will be touched upon soon) created massive waves in the world of non-fiction. Between them, they have dominated both sides of the bestseller charts.

That is one of the key underlying aspects of the case and, by extension, the existence of the Priory of Sion itself. There is a huge amount of money to be made in publishing these ideas. Whether that is because they are dangerous, because they are revelatory, or because they are entertaining, is never really made clear. But, simply because the case ever came to court, there is money to be made through publishing works on the Priory of Sion. And, with court cases such as these, there is also a huge amount of money to be lost.

So what exactly were the duo of Baigent and Leigh claiming in Courtroom 61? Their case was not as simple as run-of-the-mill plagiarism. Typically, in plagiarism cases, the prosecution must prove that the defendant took their idea and made a profit on it, without attributing credit or sharing in the revenue. This has been done countless times in the past and, in the world of publishing (and the media at large) it is not uncommon. But this particular case was slightly different.

Specifically, Baigent and Leigh claimed that Brown — in *The Da Vinci Code* — made use of a plot that was "directly plagiarized" from their own book, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. Stealing this idea, they said, allowed Brown to make a huge amount of money from the ideas of the original authors. At the time of the court case, it was estimated that Brown's writing had made him in excess of $45 million. Besides the book, there was the multi-million dollar film franchise starring Tom Hanks. *The Da Vinci Code* had achieved huge success, ranking perhaps alongside Harry Potter alone in terms of post-millennial publishing successes. This success, the prosecution alleged, was built on top of ideas that were borrowed wholesale from *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*.

That is not to say that *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* had not been successful in its own right. Far from it. Indeed, after being published in the 1980s, the book caused a huge stir. But it was considered (by both its authors and its readership) as a work of non-fiction. Walk into any bookshop in a quest for the book and it would be found in the non-fiction section. Indeed, rather than the new age or the spirituality section, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* was nestled amid other, weightier works under the banner of history. This was the realm in which the book dominated. Most non-fiction books do not sell in huge numbers, but this one was different. Perhaps because it managed to transition from the speculative theology that most people dismiss, into the realms of accepted historicism, it had become immensely popular.

And herein lay the rub. For the authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, the very existence of *The Da Vinci Code* undermined their own work. Not only were ideas borrowed from the historical text, but they were

presented in a fictional world, and this brought them into question. Convinced as they were that the Priory of Sion was a real, functioning body, the way in which Dan Brown had taken and presented his ideas undid all of the work they had achieved to that point. Their future successes (and the successes of the sequels to *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*) were damaged by the existence of *The Da Vinci Code*. This was why they were suing.

To that point, it almost seemed as though money was far from the issue. Baigent, Leigh, and Henry Lincoln (the third writer) had already become wealthy men. Their years of research into what had eventually become *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* had turned them from struggling writers into authorities on the Holy Grail and, in particular, the Priory of Sion. Michael Baigent was even quoted at the time as having said, "Whether our hypothesis is right or wrong is irrelevant." The lawsuit was not an attempted to earn punitive damages, but to protect their ideas, to protect their integrity, and to protect the idea of the Priory of Sion. As Baigent stated, the authors felt as though they had "no choice."

Baigent and Leigh resented "being lumped in" with the work of fiction known as *The Da Vinci Code*. As they constantly insisted in the press, it seemed more and more as though this was indeed a high-minded quest to protect their intellectual property in the face of an overwhelming behemoth of the fictional world. It was almost as though these men were the protectors of the integrity of the Priory of Sion, holding out against the bastardized version that had been presented to the world by the callous Dan Brown. As anyone in the publishing world will tell you, a non-fiction bestseller (such as *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*) might net plaudits and respect, but a fiction bestseller (such as *The Da Vinci Code*) will always net you the profits. So while Baigent and Leigh were keen to protect their integrity and that of their work, Dan Brown and his publishers were very keen to keep their money-making avenues open. And so there the men found themselves, facing off against one another in a London courtroom.

Key to Baigent's argument (and that of his legal team) was the idea of "historical implication." *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, the authors

argued, was an authoritative historical text. It was one that they had spent years researching and putting together. *The Da Vinci Code*, if read by millions, damaged the implied historical accuracy of the non-fiction work. It was not quite plagiarism, but it was the argument that Baigent repeated time and time again in the press.

But the idea seemed to fly in the face of common sense. Surely, if a reader sat down with either book, they would naturally know that one was a work of fiction and the other was a work of non-fiction? The tone, presentation, style, and even the cover of the book would tell them as much. As long as *The Da Vinci Code* veered away from quoting verbatim tracts of the other text without crediting it, how could this "historical implication" affect *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*?

Furthermore, if the alleged history told by the authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* was indeed held to be true, the facts should have been available to a fiction writer regardless of whether they appeared in a particular book or not. When writing about the past, school textbook writers rarely take authors to court over the mention of the Battle of Hastings or the Spanish Inquisition. If the book written by Baigent and his co-writers was based purely on fact (as is the premise in non-fiction) then there seemed little wrong with Dan Brown making use of an idea such as the Priory of Sion, and the secrets they guarded.

It took three weeks to reach a verdict. The judge assigned to the case, Peter Smith, seemed to be enjoying his moment in the limelight. Rarely in the British legal system, it seemed, was he allowed to partake in such a sensational but also so clear cut a case. It was no surprise when Judge Smith ruled in the favor of the defendant, Dan Brown. Not only did the judge rule in such a manner, but he took the time to pass comment on the accusations that had been strung out by the legal team of Baigent and Leigh. Their argument, the judge said, was "vague." They had altered their course during the trial, and had even based their entire argument on a "weak foundation."

As mentioned previously, this was a costly affair. As well as the publishing rights and the profits that had been mentioned in the case, the matter of the

legal fees was decided by the court. It cost Baigent and Leigh over a million dollars to sue Dan Brown. As they were suing in Britain, this fee was usually given as being around £800,000. But not only did they fail to secure a verdict, they lost even more money. Dan Brown's legal team (and that of his publishers) was even more expensive. It cost £1.2 million. When the judge ordered Leigh and Baigent to pay 85% of Brown's legal fees, he hit the authors with a massive bill. As most people do in this situation, they filed for an appeal. By the time this was over, the legal costs had risen to over £3 million. This is just a small sliver of the money involved in modern day discussions of the Priory of Sion, and an example of why the subject is so fiercely contested.

The effects of the judge's ruling were not limited to claiming one side right and one side wrong. The case included a close textual comparison of the two books. Led by Judge Smith, this comparison can provide a bit of insight into the ways in which the two books were created and why the consistent element across the two — the Priory of Sion and the ideas it is said to protect — became such a controversial matter. While the story of how Baigent, Lincoln, and Leigh had written their book was very distinct (a matter we will come to shortly), a discussion of how the idea came to be seemed to convince the Judge that it wasn't plagiarism.

According to Dan Brown and his legal defence, the history of the Priory of Sion was told to him by his wife. Blythe Brown, who is regarded as an expert in art and often a pool of resources for her husband's books, had read *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. As an art expert, she was more than familiar with many of the fundamental participants within the book, and discovered a new take on the ideas that she clearly found so interesting that she took the ideas to her husband. Blythe provided Dan with a basic rundown of the ideas outlined in the book, ideas which would eventually coalesce to become *The Da Vinci Code*.

Indeed, that the ideas were originally explored and outlined in *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* was never a matter which Dan Brown regarded as an issue. He went as far as to name one of the main characters of *The Da Vinci Code* after the authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. Leigh

Teabing takes his first name from Richard Leigh, while his surname is an anagram of Baigent. It seems a knowing tip of the hat to anyone who might have encountered the story of the Priory of Sion before. In a book with a plot based on hidden clues in various masterpieces of art, Brown's own puzzle is fairly easy to decipher. It was never meant to be too well hidden.

But during the course of the case, Dan Brown and his publishers' legal team pointed out that the author in fact knew very little about the topic other than what his wife told him. The judge pointed out that it seemed to be of little interest to Brown just how the research of the non-fiction book was handled. Instead, Peter Smith seemed content to agree that Dan Brown had taken his wife's research and incorporated it into his book, happy to rely on his wife's proven research skills.

While this might point towards a questionable thoroughness in the historical accuracy of *The Da Vinci Code*, this seemed to slightly disagree with the comments made by Dan Brown following the trial. After the judge had delivered the verdict and awarded the case to Brown and his publishers, the author had come out to say that he felt the result was a victory for "artistic expression." It was important, he told the press that a novelist felt free to draw on any aspect of history that he so desired, without the fear of being sued by anyone else.

That leaves then us with a number of questions. Aside from the questionable importance placed on *The Da Vinci Code* as a great work of art, we are faced with the idea of just how much we can consider the ideas behind *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* to be considered history? As will become clear over the course of this book, the very idea of the Priory of Sion is up for debate. It is said that the order's existence can be traced back thousands of years, though some suggest that its reputation died that day in a London court room. When we are asking the question what exactly is the Priory of Sion, we must ask ourselves, how exactly are we able to truthfully describe anything as being a verifiable part of history?

Nowadays, the Priory of Sion is big business. If we look once again at *The Da Vinci Code*, we can see a book that was optioned to be turned into a

film. Under the direction of Ron Howard and with Tom Hanks in the leading role, the film was successful enough that it has earned itself two sequels — *Angels and Demons* was released afterwards, while *Inferno* is set for release in 2016. But as well as the box office money the film generated, it managed to whip up the argument over the contents of the book all over again. The subject matter, it seems, is highly volatile. As we trace the history of the idea back from the three authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, this is the media frenzy that has steadily escalated over the years.

But why would it cause countries to ban the film? In India, for example, the film was criticized and outlawed for having cast aspersions over the divinity of Jesus Christ. Christianity is the largest religion in the world, with Catholicism its biggest denomination. Could one idea, put forward in a few books and a film have that big an impact?

Perhaps the answer lies with one of the authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. Of the three authors, it is the one who we have barely touched upon who can provide the entry point into the history of the Priory of Sion, the lens through which much of the ensuing story will make sense. His name is Henry Lincoln. Of all the people in this story, he is perhaps the sole reason why people in the English speaking world have heard of the Priory. He might even be the reason why you picked up this book. The difference is, his name is not familiar to the general public. But that is not to say that he is not famous, or well known.

Let's take a brief moment to look at the introduction to *The Da Vinci Code*. Before we delve into the history of Henry Lincoln, we should know that everyone who opened the bestselling work of fiction was met with a statement from the author. Before the book had even begun, before the reader starts to enter into the plot, the author has included a statement to be read. It places the book into a context. It starts with one very important word: *fact*. Throughout the book, there will be plot holes and sudden shocks. Albino monks will whip themselves and characters will double cross one another. This all takes place in the commonly accepted world of fiction. Read a novel and you are all too aware that what you are reading is

not necessarily truth. That it, unless the author goes out of his way to suggest otherwise. In the case of Dan Brown, there is a statement of "fact" at the beginning of the book which informs readers about the world they will soon enter into.

"Fact," Dan Brown writes, "The Priory of Sion […] is a real organization." The author continues to mention a number of historical sources (which we will come to later) as a means of asserting his claim, but he leaves audiences in no doubt that the Priory itself exists. Alongside the works of art which are mentioned in the book, alongside the other pieces of historical fact, and alongside the more whimsically fictional elements of the plot, Brown insists to his readers that the Priory of Sion is a very real organization and one which will be hugely important in the following novel. It is this kind of appraisal and certainty that we must understand before we meet Henry Lincoln. Without Lincoln, no one would be quite so sure at all.

Even Baigent and Leigh would agree with the way in which Brown presents the preface to his novel. Though they might disagree with the author in a courtroom, the information contained within that statement seems very much in line with exactly what they outlined in their book, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. The third writer of that book, the one who was not present in court, was Henry Lincoln. Indeed, in the follow-up to their bestselling work of non-fiction, *The Messianic Legacy,* the three authors wrote that the information about the Priory of Sion that they revealed was enough to rock the "very foundations of Christianity." Just as with Dan Brown, Lincoln and his fellow writers were more than happy to assert the legitimacy of the Priory. If this was all quantifiable fact, if Lincoln and his fellow writers had poured so much hard work into their book, if the information in *The Da Vinci Code* was just all accepted truths, then why was the Catholic Church so angry about Dan Brown's book? Why did the whole world not know about the Priory of Sion? And where had the three authors found this hidden information?

Even though he was not present in the courtroom in London, Henry Lincoln was the point of origin for the knowledge of the Priory of Sion that we have today. As one of the co-authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, you

might have expected to see him alongside Baigent and Leigh. But Henry Lincoln was never exactly what he seemed. To some people — and especially during the 1980s — he was better known as a television personality. He appeared on the occasional broadcast, covering history and presenting informative shows. Every now and then he would write something approaching serious material. Genial, laid back, and approachable, he was different to the stuffy television historians that had preceded him. Dressed in turtleneck sweatshirts and with a loose goatee on his face, he faced a number of enquires and discoveries with a relaxed yet plausible dignity. For a certain generation of television viewers, he was a marked break from the past and a fascinating figure in the world of televisual history.

This was not the whole truth about Henry Lincoln, however. When delving deeper into his life, we find many things that are not quite as they appear. Firstly, his real name was Henry Soskin. Many people in the entertainment industry change their names before they become famous. But what is interesting is that Henry Lincoln (or Soskin) was never actually a historian. Instead, he was an actor and a writer, and had been in the television industry for a long time. As a writer, he had worked on a number of science fiction shows, including the famous BBC series *Doctor Who*. Those who go looking for his name will find it in the credits of a 1968 film starring Boris Karloff called *The Curse of the Crimson Altar*. Henry Lincoln was a co-writer of the film. As an actor and a writer, we can take it as a given that he knew how to tell a story.

But Henry Lincoln's best story would be told time and time again, to increasingly more important people. It began with a holiday. In 1969, he recounted in the preface to *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, he was on his way to the south of France. Along the way, he decided that he would buy a book. He went off searching for a paperback — something light to read on holiday — and bought a novel called *The Accursed Treasure*. The book was written in French, authored by a man named Gerard de Sede. As recalled by Lincoln, it was "lightweight" and "entertaining." It managed, he said, to blend together elements of historical fact and "genuine mystery" with just a dash of conjecture. The plot revolved around a priest in a small

town in 19th century France. The priest lived in Rennes-le-Chateau, a relatively poor part of Languedoc, with a relatively poor church. But one day, the book supposed, he found an incredible secret inside his church. The secret was enough to turn the priest into a very wealthy man and his church benefitted massively.

The Accursed Treasure stuck with Henry Lincoln. Whereas the majority of people might read it once and forget about it, something about the story of the poor priest striking it lucky stayed with him. But there was a problem. While the book said that the discovery the priest had made involved "cryptic documents," the book didn't mention exactly what these documents were. These documents were even printed in the novel itself, but the author didn't provide a decryption. There were two real documents that were supposedly recovered from the church that made it into the printed book, though it was impossible to say exactly what they meant. They needed to be deciphered, a fact which clung to the inside of Henry Lincoln's skull like a limpet.

Armed with the two mysterious documents that he found in the book, Henry Lincoln set about trying to work out their hidden meaning. After not too long, he even managed it. But it was not enough. If it was this easy for Lincoln and he only had two pages from the mysterious find, why exactly had Gerard de Sede not deciphered the notes himself? For Lincoln, this simply added to the mystery. After having cracked the mystery behind the first two sheets, Henry found himself increasingly obsessed with the story. Not only did he need to decipher the rest of the papers, but he needed to let more people know about the strange documents and the message they contained. As he began to delve deeper and deeper, new secrets and "layers of meaning" began to reveal themselves to the author.

Armed with a number of these glimpses into a hidden world, Henry Lincoln set about spreading his message. He worked in the television industry already, so it seemed obvious that he should go directly to the biggest power within his business — the BBC. The British Broadcasting Corporation produced a large number of historical and documentary programs. Indeed, they even had a regular series that focused on such

issues. It was called *Chronicle*. Despite the fact that Henry Lincoln was neither an academic historian nor a qualified anthropologist, the BBC decided the story was good enough to tell anyway. They commissioned Henry to produce an item to be shown on an episode of *Chronicle*, which, when you consider the man's lack of qualifications, is somewhat remarkable. It is perhaps even more remarkable that Lincoln managed to convince the television executives despite being armed with nothing more than two photocopied pages taken from an obscure French paperback.

As remarkable as it might have seemed, Henry Lincoln received his funding and packed up and went off to France. An interview with Gerard de Sede was arranged. The author of *The Accursed Treasure* was set to meet Lincoln in Paris in the latter months of 1970. Though the interview was seemingly a laid back affair, Lincoln could not help himself but insistently question de Sede as to why he had not bothered to provide full deciphers for the entire text. After being badgered seemingly into submission, the Frenchman answered in a way that Lincoln remembered for the rest of his life. The decryptions had not been given, de Sede exclaimed, simply because "we thought it might interest someone like you to find it for yourself."

The French author could not have been more right. Lincoln, he could tell, was already hooked. The possibility of uncovering further information was like a drug and the British man had been given a taste. De Sede began to supply small morsels of information, drip feeding the truth behind the little church in the small town. This first code was not the only one that needed breaking, it seemed. Lincoln plunged deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole. One of the first mysteries presented to him involved the French painter Poussin. According to the author of *The Accursed Treasure*, there was a tomb hidden away in the French countryside that bore a remarkable resemblance to the one found in Poussin's painting, *Shepherds of Arcadia*. It was to be found near the church in Rennes-le-Chateau, in a place called Pontils. De Sede even had photographs. When he showed Lincoln, the similarity was both obvious and striking. Lincoln began to believe that he was on to something far bigger than just a regional legend. What he described as a "small local mystery" was beginning to take on "unexpected dimensions."

These unexpected dimensions meant that eventually there would be three entries in the *Chronicle* series. Not content with just the one short piece, Lincoln helped to produce another two on the subject of the church at Rennes-le-Chateau. The first was titled the *Lost Treasure of Jerusalem* and was aired in 1972. After a positive reception, it was followed up with 1974's *The Priest, the Painter and the Devil*. These first two entries struck a chord with the British television public. Just like de Sede's book, there was a delightful combination of codes to unravel, mysteries to be solved, secret histories, buried treasures, and a fascinating prospect. According to the films, the keys to unraveling the mysteries were hidden in pieces of art. Solve the puzzle in the art, and you would help solve the mystery. Just like the tomb in the Poussin painting, the church's secrets were seemingly known to artists.

One notable absence from the show was any form of criticism, especially from the more serious end of the historian spectrum. Airing on the BBC, one might expect the show to adhere to a certain set of standards. But no one wrote in to complain about the slacking historicism of the pieces by Lincoln. As only short segments which were appreciated by the majority, perhaps no one viewed them as being altogether too important. Not worth working a fuss up over. In an age when clumsy video recorders and no internet meant that once something was broadcast, repeat viewings were not very easy, there was little point in getting worked up over an item shown on *Chronicle*. Neither historians nor the Catholic Church felt the need to respond to Lincoln's findings.

Following the broadcast of the second entry in the *Chronicle* series, Henry Lincoln found his team was expanding. For the first time, he was working alongside Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh. Richard Leigh had been the first to enter into Lincoln's world. The two had been giving lectures at a summer school for writing in 1975. During a period of down time, they found themselves chatting about the Knights Templar and other mysteries. The subject turned to the films Lincoln was still shooting and Leigh offered his services should the man need anything clarified on the matter of the Templars. In addition, Leigh provided the introduction to Baigent, a

psychology graduate who had given up a fairly profitable career working as a photographer for a news agency in order to pursue his interest in everything to do with the Knights Templar.

The trio collaborated for the first time on what would eventually become the third entry in Lincoln's series of films for *Chronicle*. This one was titled *The Shadow of the Templars* and was broadcast in 1979. In Leigh's own words, the trilogy of short films were regarded by the BBC as being the "most successful documentaries [the BBC] had ever done." More significantly, the work the trio had put into the final entry in the series had given them information that would supposedly clarify the entire mystery of the church in Rennes-le-Chateau. The work they conducted together on the short film for *Chronicle* would go on to become the foundation of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*.

Anyone who has managed to catch the first entry in Lincoln's series for the BBC might remember the final words in the program. As he reminds readers in his preface to *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, Lincoln was certain that "something extraordinary was waiting to be found" in the church. The book the three men wrote together hoped to uncover exactly what that extraordinary something was. By the time the book was released, people were just as curious. So much so, in fact, that on the first day of release the book sold 43,000 copies.

Despite having no real background in history, and despite taking his lead from a forgotten piece of French fanciful writing, Henry Lincoln had put into place the pieces that would transform into our modern comprehension of the Priory of Sion. It is safe to say that had Lincoln decided against taking a holiday to the south of France, the Priory might never have become public knowledge. But with so many claims being made as to the earth shattering revelations that were uncovered at the church in Rennes-le-Chateau, it might be time to examine exactly why *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* became such a best seller.

The Secrets of The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail

Throughout this book, we have referred time and time again to *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* without spending much time focusing on exactly what the books tries to accomplish. The Priory of Sion is forever bound to this book, and no explanation about the Priory and their function would be complete without first exploring a number of the ideas that are laid out by Henry Lincoln, Michael Baigent, and Richard Leigh.

There is a central thesis to the book which will be known to anyone who has read *The Da Vinci Code*. It has been mentioned several times already in this book, but let us take a brief moment to discuss the theory in full.

Put simply, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* suggests that there is a secret society known as the Priory of Sion. The Priory can trace its history back to 1099, and has been led at various points by a collection of illustrious and well-known figures, each of whom inherits the title of Grand Master. It's said that previous Grand Masters have included Leonardo Da Vinci and Isaac Newton, and that the purpose of this secret society is to reinstate the Merovingian dynasty to the French throne, as well as to spread the power of the Merovingian family across Europe. The Priory believes that the Merovingian line is sacred and possesses a world-changing secret.

It is also suggested by the book that other societies — in particular, the Knights Templar — owe their very existence to the Priory's work. It is alleged that the Templars were established during the Crusades as a kind of military and financial division of the Priory of Sion. Through the Templars, the Priory could project a form of power without having to reveal themselves or place their secret in jeopardy. This secret is also the underlying hypothesis of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*.

It is claimed that Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity (and a major figure in a number of other major religions) was wed to Mary Magdalene. Not only this, but the marriage produced a number of children. From these

children, it is possible to trace the bloodline of Jesus Christ from his death all the way into the modern day. Following the arrest and execution of Jesus Christ, the authors believe that Mary Magdalene and her children flew the Near East and settled in southern France. There, they intermarried with a number of important noble families. This eventually led to the rise of the Merovingian kings. The Priory of Sion believes that this bloodline should be protected at all costs.

Linked to this is the idea of the Holy Grail. A long standing item of importance in Western Christendom, the Holy Grail has been described variously as a cup or chalice that — when drunk from— can give everlasting life. It has featured in film and literature, from medieval French poetry to the Indiana Jones film franchise. However, the authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* suggest that the Holy Grail is not a physical cup. Instead, it is a reference to two things. Firstly, to the womb of Mary Magdalene, which bore the children of Jesus. Secondly, to the bloodline of Jesus's descendants. As we will see shortly, they believe that an error in passing along the story changed the nature of the grail from this metaphysical reference into an actual physical item. Thus, the pursuit of the Holy Grail is actually a pursuit of the truth about the lineage of Jesus Christ. According to the book, his descendants still walk the earth today.

These theories were not simply plucked out of the air. During the course of their research, Lincoln and his fellow writers had come across the *Dossiers Secrets*, a collection of apparently ancient documents that were found hidden away in the National Library of France. These documents supposedly provided the authors with a detailed history of the Merovingian line. They combined this with their knowledge of the Roman Catholic Church, as well as their knowledge of history and the work they had already done in Rennes-le-Chateau. Not only did they believe that the dynasties outlined in *the Dossiers Secrets* demonstrated how the blood line traveled all the way back to Mary Magdalene, but they believed that they could use this information to show that the lineage could be traced back to King David.

In *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, the Priory of Sion exists in tandem with this truth about the children of Jesus Christ. It is the job of the Priory to protect and to help the lineage. But who would they need protecting from? According to the book, it is once again the Catholic Church which takes on the role of the bad guy. In the text, the authors outline how they believe the Catholic Church has threatened the descendants of Christ. Not only have they destroyed institutions such as the Knights Templar (and the Cathars) that were set up to protect the descendants, but they have also attempted to actually kill a number of the members of the bloodline. The reason? Power.

The Catholic Church, according to *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, hopes to preserve the power of the episcopal throne. That is to say, the Pope acts as the mouthpiece for God on Earth. Should a descendant of Jesus Christ himself remain alive, then it would place this power in serious jeopardy.

That leaves the Priory of Sion with a number of stated goals. The authors are able to conclude (after looking through the evidence they possess) that the Priory must be dedicated to a number of different causes, all in the name of protecting the children of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene.

The first of these goals is to reveal to the world the tomb of Sigebert IV and the lost treasures of the Jerusalem Temple. Both of these are supposedly the actual physical records of the genealogy of Jesus Christ. They provide apparently irrefutable proof of the fact that Jesus fathered children and that those children exist into the modern day. The tale of these items is linked to the rise of Charlemagne, the French king who overthrew the Merovingian dynasty.

The second is to promote the rise of a kind of pan-European national pride. This has been linked to the reinstitution of chivalry, the code of honorable practice known for its adoption by medieval French knights. The Priory are said to hope that the rise of chivalry will lead towards a better Europe in the future, though this is one of the claims which is most often dismissed when discussing *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*.

The third goal is associated with the rise in chivalric order and a pan-European sense of nationalism. The Priory hopes to see the establishment of a kind of United States of Europe, all under the banner of one religion. This Holy European Empire will be created and lead by the Merovingian (and thus holy) bloodline and will involve the conflation of both the political and religious seats of power. The Holy See will be dethroned and, in his place, the descendent of Jesus will form the spiritual and political leadership.

Finally, the authors of the book believed that — once these goals were accomplished— the Priory of Sion would be able to take on the role of a government that spans Europe. This would include the formation of a one-party government which would provide the Priory with the only means of real power.

The further one moves away from the central tenet of the book, the more it descends into the realm of typical conspiratorial notions. While there had been previous suggestions of the existence of Christ's children (and that they had been born from Mary Magdalene), *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* had been the first work to combine these notions with similarly far-reaching ideas of European power struggles.

This is perhaps because the authors incorporated a well known conspiratorial document into their research. Known as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the tract is distrustful of both the Masons and the Jews. As such, it has been described as both anti-Semitic and anti-Masonic. For Lincoln and his fellow writers, the ideas outlined in the document seemed to run parallel to those they were uncovering in their research into the history of the Priory of Sion. They even went a step further. According to the text, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was the most damning piece of evidence for the Priory's activities. They believed that the original text (the one which had formed the basis of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*) had not actually had anything to do with Judaism, but had instead been issued by the Masons (specifically, those who practiced the Scottish Rite) and the inclusion of the word 'Zion' was less a reference to Judaism (as it was interpreted) but was a reference to the Priory of Sion. It was the Priory

whom the Masons believed to be behind a global conspiracy, not the Jewish people.

Baigent, Lincoln, and Leigh seemed to be convinced that *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was not intended to be released to the public. Instead, it merely outlined the way in which the authors and their readers could wrestle control of the Freemasons in order to undermine and re-organize the church and the state. The change in the direction of *The Protocols* was made following a failed mission to attain influence in the Russian court, when Serge Nilus altered the text and released it in 1903 in order to discredit the Catholic Church. The men surrounding the Pope, it seemed to claim, were actually Jewish and Masonic conspirators, placed into positions of power. By overlooking the esoteric Christian principles so close to the Priory of Sion, Nilus managed to distance the text from the original purpose and left people down the centuries with a warped perception of the original meaning. Once again, the authors seem to suggest, the Priory of Sion faded purposefully into the background.

All of this is laid out in nearly 500 pages of text, backed up by a further 36 pages of footnotes and comments, 24 pages of pictures and photographs, as well as a 13-page bibliography which lists texts in English, German, and French. Even if the cover of the book might make it look like a thriller, the interior clearly has its sights set on academic credibility and goes to great lengths to lay out the truth of the claims. But there's a populism to the text that is not usually present in many academic works. Take for example, the way in which the story is told.

Jesus and Mary Magdalene are described as lovers. This, it is claimed, is backed up by ancient scrolls (though, in actual fact, they are books) which were discovered in Egypt in 1945 and have become known as the Gnostic Gospels. But they say the relationship between Jesus and Mary was not without its problems. The authors claim that Peter — disciple of Jesus and the man who would eventually found the Catholic Church and become the first Pope — was jealous. He did not like the intimacy displayed between the two. When Jesus was crucified, Mary fled across the water and went into hiding with her children. They are sheltered by the local Jewish

community in the south of France. Already, the story is starting to feel like a drama, rather than a dry academic work.

The story picks up some four hundred years later, as the Merovingian line begins to rise to power. The French kings are eventually displaced by the Carolingians and Charlemagne and the bloodline of the Messiah is once again forced to go into hiding. From there, the descendants of Jesus transform into the French aristocrats, the House of Lorraine. When one of their members, Godfrey de Bouillon, joins the first Crusade, he is eventually awarded the crown of the conquered Holy Lands. He becomes the first Christian King of Jerusalem for hundreds of years (if ever). But the unseen hand that has been guiding his rise to the top is none other than the Priory of Sion. The secret society have yet to be named, but following the coronation, they begin to build a small priory on Mount Zion in the captured city. It lends them their name: the Priory of Sion. As they work to form the Knights Templar, they begin to excavate Solomon's Temple and discover a hidden treasure buried beneath the ancient floor. It might be the remains of Jesus Christ or the Ark of the Covenant. It could even be the documents which finally prove the existence of Christ's descendants.

The Priory remain a powerful (though hidden) force to be reckoned with for hundreds of years. It is not until 1307 that the Catholic Church finally makes a move to have them eradicated. As the French monarchy (worried about the existence of a Merovingian bloodline) and the Catholic Church (worried about potential threats to their domination of religious law) conspire against the Priory, they make a move against the public bodies. The Knights Templar is disbanded, its members rounded up and tortured. The Templars, the Church claims, are devil-worshipping usurers. Without their great banking and military organizations, the Priory of Sion flees from public sight. They have their most important secret — the truth about Jesus Christ — and they resolve to protect it at all costs.

One of the most tantalizing aspects of the book, however, is the way in which it claims that clues and hints as to the truth about the Priory have been left in many pieces of art scattered across Europe. In the hundreds of years since the Knights Templar were first prosecuted, the Priory has

satisfied itself with leaving many clues about the truth in medieval and Renaissance paintings, sculptures, and tapestries. Perhaps most famous of these is the story of the Grail itself. According to the book (and in a legend that lends the work its title), the phrase which we know today as Holy Grail (San Graal) does indeed mean cup of tradition. This is where the image of the cup that bestows immortality came from. It was even said to be the cup that Jesus drank from at the last supper. But, the authors claim, this is actually a mistranslation of the truth. In reality, San Graal is Sang Real. A letter shifts from the end of one word to the next, there is a slight difference in spelling. Easy mistakes before the advent of the printing press. And most importantly, whereas San Graal might have meant the cup of tradition, Sang Real means holy blood. The lineage of the divine. The children of Jesus Christ. A clue to this, Priory historians say, can be found in a very familiar painting. Leonardo da Vinci knew the truth about the Holy Grail, which is why his depiction of the last supper does not feature a cup placed on the table in front of Jesus Christ. Clues like these attempt to inform the world of the truth without being explicit.

So, the book suggests, this fascinating history and amazing secret are now passed down from generation to generation. Over the next 650 years, the Priory of Sion recruited the best and brightest minds of their age, all under the guidance of a series of Grand Masters. They bore the secret about Jesus and Mary Magdalene while watching over the couple's descendants. It is the list of these Grand Masters that the team of Henry Lincoln, Michael Baigent, and Richard Leigh discovered in the National Library of France, hidden inside the *Dossiers Secrets*. The list reads like a who's who of European artistic and scientific tradition. Victor Hugo. Isaac Newton. Claude Debussy. Jean Cocteau. Robert Boyle. Leonardo da Vinci.

The presentation of these ideas in an exciting and non-academic manner makes it easy to see why *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* was a bestseller. The knowledge it seems to confer on its readers points at a centuries old conspiracy that totally redefines everything we think we know about European history, about the most popular religion in the world, and about the current state of geopolitics. It's a revelation and it is told almost like a thriller. It even involves the reader.

We have mentioned already that Henry Lincoln's investigations involved a painting by Nicolas Poussin. *The Shepherds of Arcadia*, it is pointed out, features a tomb. On the side of this tomb, the artist had taken the time to inscribe the words 'Et in Arcadia Ego,' a hint that Poussin knew all too well.

This habit of scattering clues across artworks seems to catch up with the Priory, however. As we know, in 1885, a priest in the small southern French town of Rennes-le-Chateau suddenly came into a huge amount of money. The priest, named Berenger Sauniere, is said to have discovered that one of the pillars in his church was in fact hollow. When he opened it up, he discovered a number of encrypted documents hidden inside. Along with help from a local bishop, he worked to break the codes and discovered a secret message:

"To Dagobert II [the last of the Merovingian Kings] *king and to Sion belongs this treasure and he is there dead."*

The cryptic message seemed too obscure to be relevant to anything, but Sauniere realized that it referred to the lineage of Jesus Christ. Using this information (and the other proof which he found inside the column), he was able to blackmail the Catholic Church. This provided the priest with a small fortune, money which he spent on renovating the previously poor and destitute church, and decorating it with a number of decidedly un-Christian symbols.

So, to recap, it was based on this discovery that Gerard de Sede began to write his book. From there, it was picked up and read by Henry Lincoln. Then, the BBC commissioned the production of the pieces for *Chronicle*. This put Lincoln in contact with Baigent and Leigh. This led to the discovery of the documents in the National Library of France. This, finally, led to the writing of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*.

The final stage in the authors' depiction of the Priory of Sion was perhaps the most audacious. After years of conducting research and tracking down

all of the individual pieces that came together to make up *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, they hinted as to the identity of the extant Grand Master. The man currently heading up the Priory of Sion, they believed, was named Pierre Plantard de St Clair. Pierre, they surmised, was a direct descendent of the Merovingian line and a claimant to the French throne. Thus, he was also the living embodiment of the bloodline of Jesus Christ. The reason that this information was beginning to come to light, the book claimed, was because Plantard was on the verge of launching his political career, heading up a movement which had the power to change world politics forever. What the future held for Plantard, however, the authors could not say.

The millennia-old mystery laid out by the authors of the book leads the reader right up to the moment when they are turning the pages, holding the text in their hand. It involves the reader, brings them into the fold of an ancient conspiracy.

The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail not only outlines a revolutionary plot about the history of the Catholic Church, but it deftly brings the reader into the fold. In a clever fashion, Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln manage to make their own quest for the truth involving to the reader. Through the very act of knowing about the Priory of Sion, the authors manage to make the reader complicit in the conspiracy. This is appealing on several levels and manages to explain why such a book would prove so popular, especially when other historical non-fiction works rarely sell in such numbers. It would eventually lead to Blythe Brown picking up a copy and passing the information on to her husband. It would eventually lead to two of the authors standing in a London courtroom, accusing a fiction writer of plagiarism. It is, no doubt, directly responsible for your interest in the Priory of Sion today. But that is not to say the book was without its critics. In the next chapter, we will begin to probe a little deeper into the complexities of the book and how it weaves pieces together. In doing so, we should begin to realize the truth about the Priory of Sion.

The Royal Bloodline

It might surprise modern readers to know that *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* was not immediately lambasted by critics. In this modern age of instant communication and a world wide web, such a book might be expected to cause outrage across the world, the fires fuelled by the easy availability of information. In the 1980s, however, there was an excited but fairly muted response to the ideas that were put forward by the authors.

There were those who were not impressed by the concepts. Hugh Montefiore, for example, was the Anglican Bishop of Birmingham at the time of the book's release, and he went on the television to discuss the book. Also present on the show were the authors themselves. The two parties had something of a showdown about the truth behind the book, though aired as it was on late night television and involving a British priest and a group of authors, the discussion did not become too heated.

Elsewhere, there were positive reactions. In the newspapers of the day, literary critics seemed to enjoy the fascinating insight into a previously unknown world. The Times Educational Supplement, for example, listed it as "compulsive reading," while the Oxford Times described the book as being full of "well documented and often sinister facts." There were some dissenting opinions in the press. The Times Literary Supplement (in a separate review to their Educational cohorts) called the book "rather silly" and considered it to be "worthless." There did seem to be an acknowledgement of how challenging the ideas might be, with the Sunday Telegraph concluding that the book would no doubt "infuriate many ecclesiastical authorities," even if it did concede that the authors might yet be proven right.

Even in America, on the other side of the Atlantic, people were taking notice of the book. Though the *Chronicle* series had not aired in the United States at the time, papers such as the Los Angeles Times reviewed the book

and proclaimed that there was certainly enough inside to "challenge many traditional Christian beliefs."

Reviews such as these made a big difference to how the work was viewed. In bookshops, there is a considerable difference between those books which are located in the New Age or Spiritual section, and those which are found under the banner of history. Though *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* might normally be expected to be found in the former, due to the unqualified history credentials of its authors, the press surrounding the book meant that it was moved into the latter part of the book store. Being placed in the history section brought with it a certain cache and an expectation of diligent research and truthfulness from those who were browsing the shelves. For a book which seemed to be so obsessed with conspiracies and ancient mysteries, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* did not receive the usual scepticism given to books about alien abductions or the lost city of Atlantis. It was considered a serious historical investigation, and thus the existence of the Priory of Sion was taken to be rooted in clear, well-researched historical fact. Accordingly, it sold tens of thousands of copies.

Buoyed by the success of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, the authors embarked upon not just one, but a vast number of successors across a variety of media. We have already mentioned *The Messianic Legacy* (the book's sequel) which was released less than three years later, but there were also many others, written by all three authors or individually. These had titles such as *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception* and *The Elixir and the Stone*. Henry Lincoln took a special interest in the church at Rennes-le-Chateau and began to produce guides, videos, maps, lectures, and a library of other materials focused on the building.

In the wake of the popularity of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, there has been a tidal wave of merchandise and media focused on similar themes to the original book. It's not even limited to the original three writers. Simply typing Mary Magdalene into an internet search engine will equip you with hundreds of sources proclaiming to know the truth about the biblical figure. This is true of the Holy Grail, the Knights Templar, and

many other figures that are tangentially related to the Priory of Sion. In short, it has become a booming industry.

What's more, those who have found success in publishing books on these subjects have discovered the possibility of riches and sales figures above and beyond anything normal historians might expect. It's not just books, but DVDs, CD-ROMs, and now YouTube videos that all form a new canon of Priory-related media that can almost guarantee a return on your investment. And it can all be traced back to the initial success of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. Ironically, a book which is obsessed with tracing the lineage of an important historical figure can have its influence traced over the course of almost forty years. Even this book you are reading right now is in some way related to the successes experienced by Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln. And this is without even mentioning the astronomical success of *The Da Vinci Code*.

But all of this success brought with it an added sense of judgement. Richard Leigh and Michael Baigent were not historians, neither was Henry Lincoln (though he did play one on TV). And so, following on from the astronomical sales figures and the growing interest in the Priory of Sion and the ideas laid out in *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, it should be only logical that the academic credentials of the writers would come to be questioned. When this happened, a new avenue of criticism would open. Once people started to take a critical look at the ideas behind the book, would it be able to hold up? Was the research done into the book enough to guarantee the existence of the Priory exactly as they had described?

For those who had viewed the *Chronicle* series on television or for those who had picked up *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* from the history section in the bookstore, there was an assumption of the rigor that had been put into the research by Henry Lincoln and his cohorts. It is a basic social contract, to presume that when a piece of media is presented in this style that it adheres to the principles of academic history. Other items featured on *Chronicle* were written and shot by qualified historians. The other books on the shelf in the store would have been written by similarly qualified people. For all intents and purposes, this wave of new media presented the Priory of

Sion as part of the same canon of historical research that one might expect. It just happened to be more exciting that the typical fare, and presented like a fictitious thriller.

But while it might have been assumed that the three authors of the historical work had just lucked upon a fascinating tale during their normal courses of investigation, it became apparent that the three men were particularly interested in, shall we say, non-orthodox views of Christianity. The areas which they considered — the early days of the Church, the writing of the Bible, Freemasonry, alchemy, Renaissance art, myths, legends, and secret societies — were certainly beyond the normal bounds of historical investigation. But if it were to be assumed that the writers were adhering to traditional research principles, then there was nothing wrong with this. If anything, they should be applauded for making history so interesting and relevant to the mainstream.

But therein lay the problem. The three authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* did not hold themselves to the accepted standards. They knew what was required of researchers in the field of history and they ignored those rules. It states as much in their book. But rather than shying away from such accusations, the trio embraced their lack of historicism. As well as having discovered the truth about the Priory of Sion and the truth about the Holy Grail, it seemed that the three men believed that they had also discovered a brand new way in which to look at history.

One need only look at some of the less exhilarating passages of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. While there are passages of the text which discuss secret societies and plots within the Catholic Church, there are also sections which are not nearly as exciting. The reader might be forgiven for glancing over the parts of the text where the authors take a moment to discuss the “sorely inadequate” techniques that they believe mark “academic scholarship.” Indeed, in the next sentence, they outline their belief that they were compelled to abandon such “conventional analysis” if they were to find the “requisite connections” that exist between the “radically diverse bodies of subject matter” that they choose to investigate. That is to say, they did not believe they were required to check their

research to academic standards, simply because of the subject matter that they were discussing.

As we will see later in the text, this is an incredibly significant admission, and one which will define the way in which we view the Priory of Sion, and how the group is seen by the world. It might also hold the clue as to just how a text was able to become so incredibly popular when compared to other works within the discipline. Indeed, a quick scan of the paragraph from which the above quotes were taken would serve only to furnish the reader with a number of key words. These could be "academic," "conventional," or "scholarship," all of which would hint at a higher level of academic credentials than were actually being used. By the time the full meaning behind the paragraph is clear, the less attentive reader has already moved on to exciting tales of Catholic conspiracies.

The justification given for the lack of scholarly principles in the research is said to be the subject matter itself. Since the Priory of Sion was counter to the conventional historical narrative, the writers suggests, their research should not have to adhere to the conventional standards by which historical narratives are judged. There was very little recognized previous material for them to actually study, because they were breaking new ground. The authors manage to paint a picture in the minds of the readers that their version of events is dangerous, revolutionary. Any criticism of the ideas which stemmed from the old guard, from the traditionally academic, would be obvious. It's almost like a conspiracy. Simply by pointing out the lack of standards for the research, the critics are placed firmly on the side of the bad guys. It made any criticism of the book very difficult indeed. For the authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, the novelist is freer than the historian. While the historian is confined and constrained by the academic rigors, the novelist can speculate, can envision, and can chase down even the slightest of leads. It made Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln into something like detectives, adventurous men sailing dangerous seas in order to bring home the truth. It made future accusations leveled against Dan Brown all the stranger. But it was exactly this atmosphere and this approach which allowed the writers to put forward their concepts while remaining relatively free of criticism.

So what does this mean for the book? And more importantly, what does it mean for the theories the book puts forward? A close reading of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* will mean that you frequently encounter words such as "if" and "probable." Turn to any random section of the book and the prose style will inevitably continue in this way. Once it has been pointed out, it is impossible to dissuade this from the mind. It is worth remembering that Lincoln and Leigh both had an extensive history in fiction writing. Their styles were far from academic. Accomplished writers, they would know how to present an idea in the right fashion. Through their careful use of language, as authors they could write in what is best described as a presumptuous style. Leaps of faith are made, as well as assumptions. But the clever writing disguises this on first glance.

These assumptions seem, on the surface, to be perfectly reasonable. For example, Henry Lincoln asks the reader to consider two concepts. First, that a man was born of a virgin, was able to walk on the surface of water, and — after he was executed — rose from the dead. Secondly, that a man was born, got married, and raised a family with his wife. Which scenario is more reasonable, Lincoln asks the reader, which was more likely to be true? Once the reader seems to naturally assume the latter might be more reasonable, that it is the far more probably to have happened, Lincoln then uses this as a means of backing up his argument.

But this is a flawed approach. Take, for example, the gospels. In these books of the Bible, the reader is presented with the story of a man who was born of a virgin, who did walk on water, and who did come back to life. As questionable a premise as these ideas may be, they are at least mentioned in the key text of the Christian faith. The ideas put forward by Lincoln — that Jesus got married and had children — are not. They are not mentioned anywhere. The reader is not provided with any source — at least, any source that is readily available — that indicates that Jesus might have had children. Instead, the evidence put forward by Lincoln asks the reader to make an assumption. As credible as this plea might be, it is devoid of the standards that are normally required for an assertion in a history book.

Indeed, talking many years later, Henry Lincoln tells a story about how he and his fellow writers came to the idea that the bloodline of Jesus might have been linked to the Merovingian kings. Whereas a historian might have followed a series of clues within a number of texts, the story Lincoln tells seems more like the writing department of an American television show. As the writers are sat around discussing the matter, Lincoln remembers it being as though a penny suddenly dropped. Almost out of the blue, as the team were discussing how they believed there was something 'fishy' about the Merovingian line, the pieces of information all aligned. Merovingian kings. Fishy. Fish are associated with the early Christians. They were a symbol of Jesus. Fish. Jesus. Merovingian. They must all be linked. After that, Lincoln suggests, it was just a case of putting all of the pieces into place. With historical research conducted in this manner, it is easy to see why *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* eventually drew criticism for the way it was written.

So, where does this leave us? We can consider *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* as the key turning point in the story of the Priory of Sion and how its existence became known to the public. But we also know that the way in which the book was researched was not entirely in line with the standards we might expect of non-fiction history books which make far-reaching and world changing claims. If nothing else, it increases the amount of scrutiny which we should place on the authors. But should it affect the way in which we view the Priory of Sion itself? Even if the authors were pushing the envelope in terms of their research, do we need to critically examine the society itself? In the next chapter, we will begin to pick apart the story of the Priory of Sion and how it has impacted the world.

A Growing Revolt

While the initial reviews (and the sales figures) for *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* were good, it was not long before one or two people began to notice the cracks in the theories. Those who had paid more attention during the course of reading the book or those who already had a background in the subject matter (or even those who knew how academic research is typically carried out) began to voice their concerns over the idea that Baigent, Lincoln, and Leigh had put together. The list of criticisms began to grow and grow. Many of the comments were relatively minor, but added together to form a kind of snowball effect. As the criticisms piled up, the authors were forced to defend themselves and to defend the existence of the Priory of Sion.

If we are to look at some of the most fundamental flaws in the book's reasoning, then it might help to start at the most obvious point: the central thesis. This is the idea that the bloodline of Jesus Christ was preserved in the Merovingian monarchy and their descendants. This very idea, though seemingly possible, is limited in scope by its very nature. One major problem is the time span between the rise of the French dynasty in question and the supposed date on which Jesus Christ was executed. There are roughly four hundred years between the two events, allowing enough time for perhaps twelve or thirteen generations to have lived, died, and passed on their genetic legacy. If we are to reason in the way of the book's authors, is it not probable that these subsequent generations gave birth to more than one child each time? Is it not probably that – rather than a single, definitive bloodline – there is a sprawling family tree? If these ideas are taken to be true, there would not only be the single Merovingian dynasty, but hundreds (if not thousands) of potential descendants of Christ. If this were true, then our modern age would be filled with people who (perhaps unwittingly) were all part of the same shared ancestry. The number of potential progenies of Jesus might by now number in the millions. It would seem strange that the Priory of Sion would exist to guard only a single member of

such a potentially massive family, and unthinkable that such a secret organization could keep tabs on every possible descendant.

One need only look at the royal houses of Europe for proof of this idea in practice. Queen Elizabeth II of England, for example, can trace her family roots back many centuries. Even with the huge amounts of inbreeding and intermarrying that used to define the blue bloods of the Old World, the current Queen of England shares her ancestry with many thousands of others. Not all of them are considered royalty. But with the coups, wars, successions, revolutions, and abdications that have occurred throughout European history, there is always potentially someone who is primed to take over. The idea that there might be one single living descendant of Jesus Christ (who is guarded by the Priory of Sion) seems almost ridiculous when stepping back from the book for a moment.

Which brings us neatly to Pierre Plantard. Plantard occupies a unique role in this story, in that *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* specifically names him as the living successor to Jesus Christ. This is a huge mantle to place on any one person. That they also describe him as the extant Grand Master of the Priory of Sion adds another string to Plantard's increasingly busy bow. But what did Plantard himself believe?

Despite the claims made by the authors of the bestselling book, Pierre Plantard has never once described himself as a potential relation to Jesus Christ. While it is certainly true that he believes he can trace his lineage back to Dagobert II (the last of the Merovingian kings), he has distanced himself from the claims made about his family, which were mentioned in *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. Indeed, by 1983, Plantard was specifically going out of his way to deny the theories put forward in the book and to disavow himself of any knowledge or station that the authors might have thrust upon him.

Another major point of contention raised by the book's critics concerns the actual idea of the Holy Grail itself. This concept, when looking back through the history books, does not appear to have existed before the twelfth century. As it stands, many researchers into medieval French

literature have credited Chretien de Troyes with having invented the idea. The French poet worked under the patronage of Count Philip, ruler of Flanders, and was an author of knightly romances. These chivalric tales were immensely popular during the time and one of them — The Story of the Grail — proved to be a hugely successful poem. As with all successful poems of the day, it was borrowed, copied, reworked, and retold extensively. Historian Richard Barber has gone as far as to say that, prior to 1180, no one would have had any clue as to what exactly a Holy Grail might have been at all. By extension, Barber comments that the 'Sang Real' reasoning given in *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* is nothing more than an error deriving from the mistranslation by an English writer of the original French text that was made in the 15th century. Far from conclusive proof, the mistake seems to have been a genuine product of an age before the printing press, when all book production was done by hand.

Even the story of the priest that is so central to Henry Lincoln's retelling is questionable. Berenger Sauniere, the head priest of the church at Rennes-le-Chateau, was said to have mysteriously come into a huge amount of wealth, a phenomena which the book attributes to his uncovering the truth about the lineage of Jesus and the Priory of Sion's secret. But we have the records for Sauniere's church. While he did fund renovations for the building, we know that this was accomplished through the selling of masses, a popular means of fundraising for a church at the time. From 1896 up until 1905, the priest advertised the sale of his masses in the local newspapers. Clients could pay via postal order and would receive a mention during the church service (a boon when they eventually ascended to heaven and stood to be judged before the pearly gates.) The venture was so successful that the priest was receiving as many as 150 postal orders a day, order which came not just from small religious communities, but from people outside of France. Even despite this success, Sauniere himself was far from rich. There are records of the priest applying for a bank loan in 1913, with the paperwork placing his personal finances at just thirteen thousand francs. If he had uncovered a secret that threatened the very foundations of the Catholic Church, he was by extension terribly unskilled in the art of blackmail.

Staying in Rennes-le-Chateau, one of the claims made in *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* is demonstrably false. The book suggests that Berenger Sauniere discovered that one of the pillars in the church was hollow. It even goes as far as to suggest that this particular pillar was constructed in a Visigoth style, linking it artistically to the Merovingian dynasty. Within this hollow pillar, the authors claim, the priest found a number of hidden parchments. But this pillar still exists in the church. As any visitor to the building will notice, it is far from hollow. Like every other pillar in the building, it is solid. There are no hidden compartments.

Another artistic error in *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* involves the tomb supposedly depicted in the work of French artist Poussin. Lincoln recollects how he was informed during his investigation that the tomb bore a striking resemblance to a real life counterpart. This much is true. Which tomb was the original, however, was a fact that Lincoln got drastically wrong. The tomb, which is near Rennes, that Lincoln was pointed towards was not centuries old. It had been constructed in 1903 and belonged to the wife of a local land owner. Poussin's painting was completed around 250 years earlier. It is possible to comb through the text line by line and point out the numerous errors in this fashion. Pointing out these first few, however, can begin to show of just how little the research holds up under close inspection.

The Truth

But even as the story begins to unravel, it can help to pay an increased amount of attention to the plight of Pierre Plantard. Unlike the other errors committed during the research of the book, Plantard was the only person who was directly named (and was alive to deal with the resulting attention.) If, as suggested in the book, Plantard was the supposed descendant of Jesus Christ, how would this affect his life? One thing that it certainly accomplished was forcing people to look closer at the man's history, something which he may or may not have desired.

One of the facts uncovered during an investigation into the supposed last in the Merovingian line related to one of the more troubled times in France's recent history. In the latter months of 1940, France found herself occupied by Nazi Germany. The invaders sought to set up a government in France, one which they controlled and through which they could rule over the country. This was known as the Vichy government, due to the location of its headquarters, and was headed up by a man named Marshal Petain. One day, Petain received a letter from a man signing his name as Varran de Varestra. The message was a plea, with the writer begging Petain to involve France in no further combat. Rather than asking for an end to the conflict, however, the author of the letter specifically cited "Masonic and Jewish" conspirators as posing a direct threat to France and even the world. The writer of the letter claimed to have "about a hundred reliable men" on his side who were "devoted to our cause." If Marshal Petain gave the order, Varran de Varestra and his reliable men who would leap to defeat the conspiracy.

The letter seemed to cause something of a stir within the halls of the Vichy government. An investigation was conducted and a report was put together at the request if the Secretary of State for the Interior. According to the findings, this so-called 'Varran de Varestra' was none other than Pierre Athanase Marie Plantard, who had been born in Paris on the 18th of March, 1920. He was described as a bachelor and the son of French parents, one of whom was a butler who had died in a work accident. At the time the letter

was written, Plantard was living with his mother in a two bedroom apartment, surviving on the money from his mother's pension.

Pierre Plantard, it seemed, had a long history in a number of organizations. He had established and maintained a number of groups, many of whom had a decidedly anti-Semitic and anti-Masonic tilt. La Renovation Nationale Francaise, Plantard's then-current group, was described by the officer who conducted the investigation as being "purely a figment of the imagination of Plantard." While the group's leader claimed that there were 3,245 members, there were in fact only four. The report went on to describe Plantard as being "one of those dotty, pretentious young men" who set up and ran fictitious groups such as these "in an effort to look important." The report was damning.

So Plantard dropped off the radar for a number of years. He resurfaces in the government records in 1954, when it is reported that he was held in custody in Germany after it was revealed that he was attempting to organize the meeting of a secret society. The post-war government in Germany did not approve of such things and thus held Plantard before realizing he posed little threat to anyone. He appears again in police records in 1956, this time in his native France. This time, the mayor of Annemasse — a town in Haute-Savoie where Plantard was now living — discussed the imprisonment of one Pierre Plantard in 1953, mentioning that he had been found guilty of "offences against property." But it is in 1956, in the same town of Annemasse, that we find one of the most important pieces of evidence in this entire book. During the summer of that year, a man named Pierre Plantard went to the government offices and registered a new organization. He described himself as one of four founding members, people who were tasking themselves with "the defence of the rights and freedoms of low cost housing." The name he choose for the organization was the Priory of Sion. But after this sudden introduction into the annals of government, Plantard and the Priory drop off the radar.

At this juncture, it is important to introduce another player. Noel Corbu comes to us in the first months of 1956, after a number of articles about him began to appear in the French press. At the time, we know that he was not

only a restaurant owner in Rennes-le-Chateau, but was now the owner of the estate of Berenger Sauniere. His hotel, Hotel de la Tour, was located in a fairly isolated location and many saw his appearances in the papers as an attempt to drum up publicity and encourage a few more guests to come and visit. The business had been open for almost a year and it seemed that the owner's main method of advertising involved telling people about a mysterious past filled with treasure and conspiracies. One only need take a look at one of the headlines of a Corbu interview to know the angle he was trying to promote. It read 'the Billionaire Priest of Rennes-le-Chateau's Fabulous Discovery.'

We don't know the exact details of what happened next in the story, but it is clear that during the course of the next five years, Plantard traveled to meet Corbu. Plantard had learned about the story of Berenger Sauniere and his sudden fortune. It had captivated Plantard and he wanted to know more. While it might be true that he was interested in the narrative aspects of the legend, it might be more likely that he recognized the financial potential that lay within the story. For a man who dreamed of carving out a self-important niche in the world, this was an amazing opportunity. And so, after consulting with Corbu, Plantard began to write a book. It was loosely based on the story of Berenger Sauniere and the church at Rennes-le-Chateau, though it incorporated a number of key additions. Details such as the cryptic documents hidden inside the Visigoth pillar were entirely Plantard's creation. He even went so far as to have the documents themselves constructed. A man named Phillipe de Cherisey (described as a "boozy but bright aristocrat") forged the papers that were said to be taken from the church. But the group did not stop there. They also manufactured a second set of documents and placed them into the National Library of France in a covert operation. If Plantard's story were ever doubted, he had already planted the corroborating evidence.

The only problem was that Plantard was an awful writer. He had put together a book describing the mystery of Rennes-le-Chateau and passed it around to a number of publishers. But no one wanted it. So Plantard turned to another of his friends, an author named Gerard de Sede. De Sede took the book Plantard had been working on, tidied it up, and eventually had it

published in1967. When we look into the details of the publishing contract, we see some interesting additions. Philippe de Cherisey, for example, is noted as being entitled to a share in the profits. We even have a collection of letters that were sent back and forth between De Cherisey, Plantard, and De Sede which discuss how their elaborate hoax was progressing and the numerous strategies which they developed in case anyone should accuse them of lying. One such strategy was to make use of an organization Plantard had already registered, the Priory of Sion, and plant evidence of its ancient history in the National Library. It would sit there for years, undiscovered, until an inquisitive hand plucked it from the shelf and used it to prove the existence of the Priory. That inquisitive hand belonged to Henry Lincoln.

It was not long after the publication of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* that all of this was revealed to the public. A journalist named Jean Luc Chaumeil, writing in 1983, was living on the fringe of the group of men who worked so hard to set up the hoax. He knew them personally and even exchanged communications. He had in his possession not only a series of letters detailing the plan, but a 44-page confession written by Philippe de Cherisey which outlines how the forgery was handled. After Chaumeil launched his accusations against the group, other researchers such as Robert Richardson, Paul Smith, and Henry Cran (a producer for the BBC) began to look into the stories of Henry Lincoln and his fellow writers. It was Cran, researching the theories put forward in the *Chronicle* films, who began an investigation into the Priory of Sion and its legitimacy. His findings formed the foundations of a 1996 episode of *Timewatch* titled the History of a Mystery, in which he managed to trace the family tree of the Plantard family back as far as the 16th Century. He discovered that, rather than dethroned royalty, Plantard's ancestor was in fact a walnut farmer.

And this is where the truth finally becomes clear. It was a hoax. A conspiracy. An attempt to trick the public. Pierre Plantard, far from being the last in the bloodline of Jesus Christ, was a chancer who had hoped to make a name for himself. He had no idea that a group of writers from England would be so easily fooled by his games, especially to the extent that they were. What had begun as a small lie — perhaps even an attempt to

drum up business for a failing hotel — had turned into an international sensation. The publication of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* changed everything. It brought an increased scrutiny to Plantard's story, which buckled under the weight of the investigation.

It soon became clear that the long lines of names and genealogies that had been presented as evidence were in fact simply copied from other documents. They had been tinkered with here and there, made to fit, while others were simply travelogues which had been repurposed for the situation. We even know what motivated the people to invent their stories. De Cherisey states his interest in surrealism and had a background in experimental fiction, including being a member of the 1960s organization, the Workshop for Potential Literature, which saw its members invent puzzles, codes, ciphers, and tricks on a regular basis. Plantard, as should be obvious by this point, was desperate in his quest for attention and had always seen the construction of mysterious secret societies as a means to that end. Many of the other participants — Gerard de Sede and Noel Corbu, for example — simply hoped to make a bit of money and never expected Plantard's plan to explode in popularity as it did.

It must have been strange to see the group of men as they steadily began to feed Henry Lincoln more and more information. Lincoln seemed genuine in his intrigue, convinced in the true nature of the conspiracy he was beginning to unravel. In that respect, the French conspirators played him perfectly. They were always on hand to provide a nudge in the right direction or a hint about where to look for a clue. In many respects, they allowed Lincoln to work himself into the story, to become a part of the legacy of the Priory of Sion in much the same way that readers of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* were seduced by the book. It must have been astonishing to the original plotters to discover that not only had they successfully tricked Lincoln into creating the film about their invention, but also that they managed to string him along for a further ten years, during which time he shot two more films and brought in his fellow investigators.

But by the mid-nineties, well after the release of the best-selling book, Plantard seemed unable to perpetuate his invention. By this time, his true

nature had been revealed, rather than the invented persona as a descendant of Jesus Christ. This resulted in an admission — under oath in a French courtroom — that Plantard had invented everything. The entire business, he admitted, was nothing more than a fraud.

His death in 2000 was not met with revulsion or derision, as some might expect for an extravagant fraudster. Nor was he mourned as the last in a divine bloodline. Rather, his death was treated with something of a nostalgic remembrance. France had lost a jovial and mostly harmless conman. By this point in time, there was no one left to believe his story and the entire episode was seen as something of a humorous incident. Well done, people thought, at managing to trick the English writers. Very funny indeed. But while everyone in France seemed to be able to see Plantard for what he really was, there were a few people who still clung to the belief that he had been telling the truth. They still believed in the Priory of Sion. Among them were Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and even Dan Brown. Thanks to their continued belief, the story of the Priory of Sion is far from over.

The Victims of the Priory

As it stands, then, there is indeed a conspiracy surrounding the Priory of Sion. The only problem is that it is an entirely different conspiracy than the one we set out to investigate. At the beginning of this book, we began with the promise of uncovering a millennia-old secret that concerned the very founding principles of the world's foremost religion. But as we trace the story further and further backwards in time, it soon becomes very clear that the original premise is built on very shaky foundations. Despite the claims of truth that are reiterated throughout works such as *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, we are left with a certainty that the entire affair has been an attempt to pull the wool over the public's eyes. Rather than a story that begins close to 0 BC, our story really starts around 1950 AD and tries to write itself into the history books. While we originally set out to uncover the victims of an ancient Catholic conspiracy, we should ask ourselves who became the victims of a modern attempt at fraud?

Perhaps the most obvious victim is Henry Lincoln. We can have little doubt that — at least in 1969, when Lincoln first went on holiday to the south of France — he honestly believed in the truth of the story he began to uncover. As recently as 2004, he was discussing Pierre Plantard with an interviewer. During the course of the discussion, Lincoln mentioned that the now-deceased Plantard would have made an excellent poker player. With an increasing degree of vehemence, Lincoln passes over the Frenchman's unreadable qualities and mentions that we as a public actually know very little about Pierre Plantard, much in the same way that we know very little about Berenger Sauniere. Furthermore, he exclaimed, we know very little about the Priory of Sion. In fact, he finished, we know almost nothing at all. Lincoln, during the remainder of the interview, laments the existence of "demonstrable facts," as he calls them. As he admits, the majority of writing is actually "hearsay evidence, guesswork and interpretation." As Lincoln confesses, none of the written works on the subject — including his own — hold any validity at all.

This is a damning statement. It seems to be both a confession and a ray of hope. Even if he admits to the fact that his own book contains a huge amount of speculation, the lack of provable knowledge about the background of Plantard (and the Priory of Sion) seems to be an indication that there could well be something there. If only we were to dig a little deeper or search a little harder, we might be able to finally uncover the evidence of the Priory of Sion that men such as Henry Lincoln have been searching for over many decades.

But as damning as Lincoln's interview might be, it is also untrue. It is false to say that we know nothing about Plantard or Berenger Sauniere, or even — by extension — about the Priory of Sion. In fact, we actually know quite a large amount. One of the best-known facts we have in our possession is the knowledge that the existence of the Priory of Sion is a lie. It is a scam. A con. A fraud, and one which tricked Lincoln completely. Henry Lincoln was perhaps the first major victim of this con and, so complete was the trick that the con seems to have endured to this day. At the back of Henry Lincoln's mind is an insistent suggestion that there might actually be a Priory of Sion after all. It niggles away at him and refuses to allow him to disavow the theory altogether.

So while we know that the Priory of Sion was indeed a conspiracy created by a small group of French con men, we know that the first victims were actually those who did the most to popularize the lie. That leads us to the next step in the process and one of the most important questions of all. Were the writers of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* simply the victims of a hoax? Did they willingly allow themselves to be deceived? Or were they even a part of the deception themselves?

For more information on this question, it might help to turn to one of the writers who did actually expose the lies behind Plantard and the Priory of Sion. Jean Luc Chaumeil released his own book in 1979, which was only a short time after the broadcast of the last in the series of films Henry Lincoln produced for *Chronicle*. It was still a good three years before the release of the book by Henry Lincoln, Richard Leigh, and Michael Baigent, at a time in which these three men were said to be conducting their (supposedly)

rigorous research. In a later interview with Channel Four television (a British broadcaster), Chaumeil mentions a story about how he tried to get in contact with the men who were writing *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. Chaumeil is adamant that he attempted to contact the trio up to a year before their book was published in order to alert them to the nature of the scam.

Such an allegation would have a big impact on how we view the authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. Had they intentionally ignored such a warning and published their ideas anyway, at least without checking up on Chaumeil's comments, then it would render their decision making process questionable, to say the least. Such an accusation was directly leveled at Michael Baigent himself during the filming of an investigation by the actor and television historian Tony Blackburn. When asked whether the French journalist's accusations were true, Baigent states that he cannot recall the incident. Not only this, but he goes on to state that Chaumeil was "never necessarily very close to the inner groups of the Priory." It is unclear to whom Baigent is referring in this comment. It might be a reference to the group of men who had created the Priory and forged the documents that had so successfully fooled people. Or, conversely, it might be a reference to the actual Priory of Sion themselves.

But thankfully, Tony Robinson followed up the question and asked Baigent about his opinions on Chaumeil's allegations that the entire Priory of Sion organization was nothing more than a surrealist fantasy. Baigent's answer is simple and to the point. "He's wrong," Baigent exclaims. When asked how he can be quite so sure that the journalist's version of events is incorrect, Baigent puts forward his own research skills and abilities forward as proof. He has seen the documents himself, Baigent tells his interviewer, has researched them and spent six years examining and learning about the Priory of Sion. To that extent, and with all of his research having been done, Baigent states that he is "satisfied that the Priory exists." It would be hard for Baigent to be any clearer on his views. Even in recent times, he seems convinced that the documents and histories that he presented to the world in *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* were entirely legitimate.

In actual fact, Baigent has gone on record time and time again and reiterated that he believes both he and his team checked, examined, and verified all the information they came across in the course of their research. Not only does Baigent claim that he and the team checked everything they could, but he was happy with their conclusion, that it "proved accurate." The style and diligence of this checking is not mentioned, however, though it cannot have been entirely thorough. By 1993, every person involved in the French side of the hoax had as much as admitted their guilt. The documents — including the *Dossiers Secrets* that had been hidden in the National Library of France — had been confirmed as fakes.

But Baigent did not relent. *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* was reprinted in 1996 and the author took the time to address these accusations in an afterword he wrote especially for the new edition. Along with the other authors of the book, it was argued that the accusations leveled against the book and its theories stood on shaky ground. Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln suggested that Plantard did not stand to "gain financially or in any other way" from fabricating the documents. They reiterated once again that they believed there was no reason to doubt Plantard's word. It seems a stretch that the authors could truly believe that Leonardo da Vinci and Sir Isaac Newton had led hidden lives and kept the secret of the bloodline of Jesus Christ, but not that Pierre Plantard could have invented or lied about the Priory of Sion.

It is the origins of the Priory that have caused the loudest defences from the authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. In the follow up to their best-selling book, titled *The Messianic Legacy*, the authors doubled down on their belief in the existence of the Priory of Sion. Though the book was published in 1987, long after Chaumeil's articles revealed the truth, Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln reiterated their belief in the Priory's authenticity. Not only that, but the sequel made it clear just what they thought of the accusations that their previous claims might not have been true. In one section of the book, the authors admit that "nothing appeared straightforward" when they were researching the Priory. They enter into a vivid description of the nature of the Priory of Sion in which they compare its existence to "a holographic image." This image, they say, shifted,

altered, and appeared differently under changing lights. From one side, the book claims, the Priory of Sion appeared to be an "influential, powerful and wealthy international secret society," though they concede that, in another light, the Priory might appear to be nothing more than a "dazzlingly ingenious hoax devised by a small group of individuals for obscure purposes of their own." Perhaps, the authors suggest, both views were true.

This is an interesting tactic by the writers. In writing this passage, they place their own interpretation of the hoax on equal footing with the truth. Both versions are equal, they seem to suggest, just different perspectives. But while the idea that the Priory of Sion is nothing more than a con was backed up by reams of evidence and confessions, their own claims about the true nature of the Priory was still based on documents which were known to be fraudulent. While it might seem that the authors were being reasonable in adding an element of doubt, their acquiescence is nothing of the sort. Once again, they resort to depending on poor and inadequate research skills, wrapped up in convincing rhetoric.

One need only look at Baigent's background for some insight into why he might want to believe in the Priory of Sion. The man's personal history points towards someone who could very easily fall into the belief that there might be a negative agenda hidden within the Catholic Church. As per his own recollections, Baigent was raised in a devoutly Catholic household. His entire youth featured a dedication to the church, so it's possible that any rejection of their teachings could be a form of anti-establishment resentment. In his home town in New Zealand, Michael Baigent and his family would attend their local Catholic church at least three times a week. From the age of five, he was even given private lessons from a theology tutor on the history and doctrine of the Catholic Church. Like most teenagers, he rebelled against his parents and the overarching institutions in his life. But while some teenagers turn to drink or drugs, the young Michael Baigent still felt the need to scratch a religious itch. For a period, he began to attend every different kind of church that he could. The Anglicans, the Methodists, the Presbyterians, and even the Mormons all welcomed him into their church. But he never quite found the answers he was looking for.

Later, when he went away to university, Michael Baigent changed his area of study. Though he had originally been signed up to a science degree, he decided to switch courses and take comparative religion. Perhaps if he had stayed his original course he might have gained a better understanding of how to achieve provable results through research. Nevertheless, his interests while at university began to grow increasingly esoteric. As well as his comparative religion classes, he began to stretch his interests into more obscure branches of theology. He joined a group named the Builders of Adytum, who practiced the little understood art of Christian Kabbalah. Up until his graduation, he maintained an interest in the less mainstream aspects of the Christian world, miles away from his Roman Catholic upbringing.

Eventually, this path brought him to England. Moving to London in the 1970s, he moved into a flat with a man named Richard Leigh. The two became great friends and soon discovered a shared passion for the stranger aspects of religion. By this time, Baigent was pursuing a mildly successful career as a photojournalist. But when Richard Leigh introduced Baigent to a man named Henry Lincoln, he was quick to give this up. After Lincoln outlined his interests in the film he was currently making for the BBC, Baigent quickly sold all of his photography equipment in order to fund his research with the pair of writers. He even started working night shifts at a nearby soft drinks factory in order to pay his way while carrying out the preliminary research on what would eventually become *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. It is safe to say by this point that Michael Baigent was heavily invested in the existence of the Priory of Sion and was obsessed with the possibility that there might be a hidden meaning behind the Catholic doctrine. The discoveries made by the team provided him with the ideal justification for his growing suspicions about organized religion, as well as indulging his fascination with the esoteric practices. Baigent says as much, admitting during his deposition in court that “with hindsight, I had become obsessed with [the Priory of Sion].”

Even after the release of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, Michael Baigent was seemingly still wrapped up in his obsession. A man named Paul Smith, a noted sceptic of the ideas laid out in the book, recalls going to

visit Baigent in 1993. Though Smith insists that Baigent was both hospitable and courteous, he seemed surprised to note that the man remained adamant about the existence of the Priory of Sion, that the Merovingian bloodline could be easily traced to the modern age, and that the Line of David (and thus Jesus Christ) was a probable fact. Even when looking through the papers and documents that Baigent kept in the home, Smith discovered various sources that seemed to conclusively prove that the story of Sauniere and the church at Rennes-le-Chateau was a myth. Either they were ignored or dismissed. According to Smith, these notable pieces of evidence lay in the hands of someone who "did not know how to use [them] properly." Baigent, Smith says, was more interested in pursuing "non-sequiturs relating to pseudo-history."

The more we learn about Michael Baigent, the more it becomes possible to sympathise with him. Though he might well have been proven wrong time and time again, there is nothing malicious in his continued belief in the existence of the Priory of Sion. Rather, he seems to be a man who is always able to look in another direction when confronted with evidence that runs contrary to his world view. That is not to say that he does not thoroughly examine 'evidence.' During the course of the research for *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, Baigent and his fellow writers examined a huge amount of information over the course of many years. The issue is the critical approach Baigent and his colleagues were able to take. Every time they evaluated a source, they seemed happy to use only information which ratified their beliefs, and dismiss anything that might dissuade them from their opinions. Confessions and conspiracies from men such as Pierre Plantard were readily dismissed because Baigent and his fellow writers approached the idea of the Priory of Sion with an almost religious fervour. They had faith in the idea, even when all evidence ran to the contrary.

There is an anecdote which can provide some insight into the matter. The one-time editor of the *Spectator*, Matthew d'Ancona recalls a lunch meeting that was held in the 1990s in a restaurant in central London, named L'Amico. The meeting was held between two distinct 'sides.' On one hand were a group of right of center political thinkers whose chief unifying ideology was that they all wanted to withdraw Britain from the European

Union. On the other side were a group whom D'Ancona described as 'men who don't get out very much.' These were Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh. The meeting had been put together by the two authors with the aim of probing the Eurosceptic group for information. D'Ancona recalls the question being asked as to whether the right wingers had ever come across anything peculiar in their drive to separate Britain from the EU? Had they ever had the sensation that there might be some hidden agenda to the formation and rise of the European Union? Could it be that — rather than creating a federation of nations for the purposes of trade and governance — there might be a cover intention to accomplish something as strange as to restore the bloodline of Jesus Christ to a position of power, perhaps? According to D'Ancona, the authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* put together the lunch meeting with the soul intention of reaffirming one of their more outlandish ideas. It speaks volumes of the lengths to which they would go to prove themselves right. It seems strange to consider this the work of men who might be acutely aware of the inherent falsity of their own ideas.

It certainly seems as though there is a legitimate belief among the writers of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* that the Priory of Sion actually exists. Certainly Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh seem convinced by the evidence they have seen, to the point where they were willing to defend themselves under oath. Even the principles behind their lawsuit against Dan Brown seem to suggest that it was the suggestion that their ideas might be fallible that caused the real issue, rather than literal plagiarism. But there was one man who was absent from the trial. Trying to pin down the beliefs of Henry Lincoln seems a bit harder.

Some suspect that Henry Lincoln was much quicker to realize the truth behind the Priory story. After having worked as a writer in film and television for many years, he was well aware of what it took to tell a story and to tell it well. It might even be that once he noticed the money that was to be made from writing *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, he saw it as being no different than penning another episode of *Doctor Who* or some other science fiction B movie. Lincoln was a man who had already built a television career on a slight deception. He was not a historian nor an

archaeologist, though was more than happy to present himself as one on *Chronicle* and other TV shows. How was participating in the conspiracy behind the Priory of Sion any different than pretending to be an historian? Certainly, it seems, the truth was not the be all and end all for Henry Lincoln.

In the years since *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* was released — and especially more in the wake of *The Da Vinci Code*'s success — Henry Lincoln has given many interviews. One of these in particular gave a slight insight into the way he views the evidence for the existence of the Priory of Sion. During the course of the discussion, Lincoln quite freely admits that the documents themselves — such as the *Dossiers Secrets* — are proof of "absolutely nothing" except the fact that the documents have been created. This, he says, is true of all documents. Lincoln finishes the rather abstract thought by stating that "nothing is better than anything else."

"In history," he suggests, "nothing is real so there's nothing to get hung up about." It is a telling admission of how Lincoln views his work on the history book. It speaks of how far his standards of evidence are from the typical historian's and how he views his work as being more akin to a novel than an actual academic work. If anything, the comments of Henry Lincoln seem to place him on an equal footing to Dan Brown. Perhaps the reason why he was not present at *The Da Vinci Code* trial was that he saw too much of himself in Dan Brown. To criticize Brown would be to admit he himself was wrong. While he may have truly believed in the existence of the Priory of Sion at the time of writing, it seems that Lincoln is alone among the authors in realizing the true nature of the organization.

The Fallout

During the course of this book, it has become increasingly clear that any assertion as to the existence of the Priory of Sion is fundamentally flawed. Nevertheless, this has not stopped numerous publications — books, leaflets, articles, films, television programmes, and other media — from shouting loudly about the ideas put forth in *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. Even after the fallout from the French conspiracy has proven these ideas to be false, people have taken these concepts and run with them. Today, there are myriad media sources that profess to be able to inform the audience of the reality behind the legend. Despite the evidence that has been put forth, what do people still think about the Priory of Sion today?

As might be expected, there are hundreds of competing theories as to the true nature of the Priory. A quick Google search will return over 360,000 results just for the search terms 'Priory of Sion.' There are dedicated websites, Wikipedia pages, and YouTube videos, all of which profess to give the public the best possible explanation of what the society is. As well as this, Google will make some suggestions to the avid searcher, mentioning Knights Templar, Mary Magdalen, Opus Dei, and the Illuminati as searches which are related to the Priory of Sion. It quickly becomes clear what kind of company the search terms keep.

For those who have spent a great deal of time trawling through the information that is available online, there are a number of repeated themes and ideas. As you read through web page after web page, these ideas will crop up time and time again. A number of these have not been touched on yet by the book but now seem essential to the modern interpretation of the Priory of Sion. So let us take the time to follow a few of these tangents, in order that we might better understand what the Priory of Sion means in the modern Internet age.

Mary Magdalen

Mary Magdalen is perhaps one of the most important persons in this story and one who we have barely touched upon during the course of this book. She is an important figure in the story of the Priory of Sion, and one who extends beyond the realms of the questions of fraud and delusion that mark so many of the other topics in this text. Though her name is famous around the world, there is a huge amount of misunderstanding about exactly who Mary Magdalen was, and what her role was in relation to the biblical figure of Jesus Christ. Her story is marked by vicious attacks on her character and possibly one of the earliest examples of slander and misrepresentation. But who exactly was Mary Magdalen?

Perhaps some of the confusion over the identity of Mary Magdalen comes from the fact that she shares her name with a far more famous biblical figure. Not to be confused with the woman who gave birth to Jesus — the Virgin Mary, or Mary of Bethany — who was the sister of Lazarus, she occupies a slightly strange role in the story of the New Testament. Just like the apostles, she is said to have traveled around with Jesus and is a figure in many of the stories of the biblical son of God. Chief among these is the story of his death, whereupon she witnesses the crucifixion and the resurrection up close. Across all four gospels, her name is mentioned twelve times. Though it might seem like a low number, this is actually higher than many of the lesser known disciples.

However, during the Middle Ages, there was a distinct shift in the way in which she was presented to the world. Though the biblical sources seem to depict her as another follower of Christ, her reputation was tarred. Erroneously (according to most scholars) Mary Magdalen was presented as a “repentant prostitute” to the followers of Western Christianity. Supported by very little evidence in the actual Bible, many preachers, clerics, and members of the holy orders were more than happy to describe Mary Magdalen as something of a “loose woman.” Over the ensuing centuries, she became known more for her manufactured past as a prostitute rather than her devotion to the biblical Jesus.

So, if Mary did not deserve this reputation, what does the bible actually say about her? Well, we do know that it says Jesus cast out seven demons that

had been inhabiting her body. In both the gospels of Luke and Mark (the latter of which expands more on the topic), she is mentioned as a woman who followed Jesus and the apostles as they "traveled about from one town and village to another." It was Jesus, they state, who cleansed Mary of the seven demons that had beset her, which some people have interpreted as being the curing of mental health issues which were not well understood at the time.

It is during the crucifixion that Mary Magdalen plays a real role, however. During the execution of Jesus Christ, she witnesses three major events. She is present at the crucifixion itself, at the burial, and is one of the people who notices that the tomb is empty a few days later. All of Mark, Matthew, and John mention her specifically by name during these events while Luke, who mentioned no names, does recall the presence of "women who had followed [Jesus] from Galilee." As such, it is safe to assume that — in any biblical portrayal of the execution of Jesus Christ — Mary Magdalen was present.

But she also plays a far more important role. In Mark, Matthew, and John, it is Mary Magdalen who is the first witness to the most important of Christian events: the resurrection. Three of the gospels describe either Mary Magdalen alone or with others as being the first person to notice that the tomb of Christ is empty. In a number of passages from Mark and John, it is made clear that she was the first person to whom the resurrected Christ appeared. In certain passages, it is made clear that this meeting is a private one shared between Jesus and Mary Magdalen, a privilege not afforded to many of the more esteemed apostles. It seems, then, that she plays a very important role in the life of Jesus Christ, especially by the time he is executed.

Not only that, but the way she is presented in the gospels seems to position her as an important figure. Every time a group of women is mentioned in the gospel of Mark, for example, it is Mary Magdalen who is mentioned first. In each of the four major gospels, her name is specifically mentioned in a way which — according to the historian Carla Ricci — "cannot be considered fortuitous." Her mention is deliberate and the importance which the writers place on her presence is clearly intentional. So how was she

transformed from an important follower of Christ into a woman whose name became a byword for a prostitute?

We already know that the view of Mary Magdalen as a repentant prostitute is not supported by the gospels. She is not mentioned anywhere else in the canonical bible (though she does make an appearance in a number of the books which were supposedly cut from inclusion). Scholars have traced the sullying of the reputation of Mary Magdalen back to Pope Gregory I. In 591, he issued a claim which conflated both Mary Magdalen and an unnamed sinner in the bible. He formed what is known today as a "composite Mary." This meant that she now would carry a reputation for the sins of many other people who are not named in the text itself. Gradually, the seven demons that were said to be expunged from her body by Jesus came to represent the seven capital sins and, soon enough, Mary Magdalen was being condemned as a representation of lust and covetousness.

But there is a hidden history of Mary Magdalen. As well as her unfair corruption by the Catholic Church, there is said to have been a number of other sources from the time that the gospels were written that position her as being far more important to Christianity. Known as the Gnostic gospels, there are a number of books which were not included in the bible. While Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the accepted four gospels, there are also accounts from other apostles, such as Philip. For one reason or another, they were not chosen to be included in the 'official' biblical canon. They had been pieced together today as the Apocrypha and few traces of their messages can be read. Perhaps most importantly, we have discovered that there was — at one time or another — a Gospel of Mary.

The Gospel of Mary differs from the main texts in a number of ways. Firstly, it places a higher importance on the role of women in the early Christian Church. It is thought that the book was written at the same time as the Gospel of Philip (also in the Apocrypha) though the fragments we have of the Gospel of Mary date from around the third century. It is generally accepted that the Mary of the title is Mary Magdalen. Indeed, in the course of the gospel, there is the admission that Mary was preferred by Jesus

compared to all of the other disciples. As well as Peter admitting that Jesus loved Mary "more than the rest of woman," Levi suggests that "the Saviour … loved [Mary Magdalen] more than us."

But there are other mentions of Mary in the Apocrypha. In the Gospel of Philip, she is described using the Greek word for partner, companion, or comrade. Variously, Philip describes how the affection shown to her by Jesus caused jealousy and annoyance among the other disciples, as well as mentioning that Christ used to "kiss her often." It is references such as these that form the basis for one of the key conceits of the Priory of Sion.

As we have seen earlier in this book, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* works hard to establish the theory that Jesus bore children. According to their theory, it was Mary Magdalen who not only mothered the divine bloodline, but was actually Jesus's wife. Given as evidence are facts such as the preference the apostles seem to give her in the gospels, that Jesus would appear to her in private as the first person he visited when coming back to life, and mentions such as that in the Gospel of Philip which seem to describe a romantic relationship. They argue that it would have been perfectly natural for a Jewish man in the Near East at the time to have a wife and to have children, so much so that it was not worth mentioning in the text other than in passing. Mary Magdalen, they argue, was actually the wife of Jesus Christ.

And this is where one of the more conspiratorial aspects of the book comes to the forefront. It is argued in *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (as well as *The Da Vinci Code*) that Mary Magdalen became an enemy of the Catholic Church. We have already noted the apparent jealousy that the other disciples were said to feel towards her, while her demonization by the church is said to be a part of a Catholic conspiracy to maintain power. Her reputation was sullied in order to discredit her and to discredit the potential bloodline of Jesus Christ. Whereas a descendant of Jesus might be a threat to the Pope as God's representation on Earth, the child of a prostitute merited little attention. The campaign against Mary Magdalen was not just an attempt to reassert patriarchal beliefs through the medium of a religious

text, but it was an active attempt to discredit the one threat to the Catholic Church's position. In that respect, they certainly succeeded.

Or did they? If nothing else, books such as *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* and *The Da Vinci Code* have prompted a mainstream reappraisal of the identity of Mary Magdalen. As we have seen, it is now possible to go online and search for more information on subjects related to the Priory of Sion. If, when searching online, one discovers the tangents and the associated ideas, then they might come across the numerous sources which state the claim about the real nature of Mary Magdalen. While she might not have been the wife of Jesus Christ (and her being linked to the Priory of Sion is yet another aspect of that hoax), there are sources and academic works out there which discuss the reputation and the changing attitudes towards this figure over the years. In prompting people to learn more about Mary Magdalen, provably false works about the Priory of Sion can point readers and audiences towards a small kernel of the truth. In that respect, at least, it seems that the Priory of Sion is retroactively doing a great deal to promote Mary Magdalen.

While they might not be protecting a fictitious bloodline, they are in fact doing something in encouraging people to delve deeper into the actual truth behind one of the bible's most mysterious figures. In a manner nobody ever expected, books such as *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* have managed to alter public opinion on Mary Magdalen, or at least begin a gradual movement towards a reassessment of who she actually was. As such, it might even be possible to claim that the Priory of Sion have partly succeeded in their goal, even after having been proven as a complete hoax.

The Grand Masters

Another core part of the myth of the Priory of Sion is the exaltation of the supposed Grand Masters. In creating the backstory for the existence of the Priory, Plantard and his fellow hoaxers very carefully put together a list of people whom they considered to be potential leaders of a secret, anti-Catholic organization. They even gave the position a title, naming the Grand Masters as the Nautonnier, which is an Old French word that translates roughly as 'navigator.' In esoteric circles, the title of Nautonnier has variously be translated as Grand Master, hence the title that is given in both *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*.

The way in which the list of previous Grand Masters was put together was one of the more devious aspects of the Priory of Sion hoax and it is one which has often gotten the most attention from the public. Using the assumed name Philippe Toscan du Plantier, Pierre Plantard painstakingly assembled his list which spans from 1188 right up to the 1960s. The list was included in the *Dossiers Secrets* d'Henri Lobineau, which was the document he and his team hid inside the National Library of France and waited for people to discover.

The list was complex in its creation. It should seem an obvious point that each person included and mentioned by name was dead by the time Plantard put pen to paper. This meant that there was no one living who could deny their involvement. If any family member or biographer spoke up and questioned the inclusion of any one particular person, Plantard and his co-conspirators could quite easily fall back on the reasoning that the Priory of Sion was a secret society and that there was little chance of the Grand Master himself telling people of its existence.

The list includes some of the most famous artists and thinkers in European history, though it is not entirely without a basis. In fact, all but two of the names that are on the list can actually be found on the list of members of the Ancient Mystical Order Rosae Crucis, another fabricated secret

religious society which was becoming increasingly famous in France at the time of Plantard's writing. In addition, many of the people on the list have been noted for possessing a vague interest in the existence of the occult, so their inclusion plays on the expectations and notions many members of the public already possess.

As a point of interest, it should be noted that Plantard created an interesting piece of lore in writing the *Dossiers Secrets*. According to him, the Priory of Sion and the Knights Templar shared a common Grand Master for a long time. That was up until 1188, when a schism occurred. Following this, each society had a different leader. Plantard even tied this into a real historical event, known as the Cutting of the Elm. This referred to a diplomatic incident between the English and the French monarchies, known to commemorate the negotiations between the Franks and the Normans. While the English had stood in the shade of the tree, the French had been made to suffer under the light of the sun. Following the close of the talks, the French king demanded that the tree be cut down. This was a sign that the English would be shown no quarter should they continue to disagree. Through reasons not made explicitly clear, this historical event had an impact on the Grand Masters of the Priory of Sion. Little touches such as this are just one way in which Plantard sought to lend his creation a sense of historical legitimacy, offering readers just enough fact to allow them to form their own conclusions.

In all, the list is comprised of 26 men. In chronological order, they are:

- Jean de Gisors
- Marie de Saint-Clair
- Guillaume de Gisors
- Edouard de Bar
- Jeanne de Bar
- Jean de Saint-Clair
- Blanche d'Évreux
- Nicolas Flamel
- René d'Anjou
- Iolande de Bar

- Sandro Filipepi
- Léonard da Vinci
- Connétable de Bourbon
- Ferdinand de Gonzague
- Louis de Nevers
- Robert Fludd
- J. Valentin Andrea
- Robert Boyle
- Isaac Newton
- Charles Radclyffe
- Charles de Lorraine
- Maximilian de Lorraine
- Charles Nodier
- Victor Hugo
- Claude Debussy
- And Jean Cocteau

A quick look through the list reveals a number of famous and less famous figures. Leonardo da Vinci and Isaac Newton are two which immediately catch the eye — surely the reason why Dan Brown titled his book *The Da Vinci Code* — while members such as Robert Fludd and Edouard de Bar are certainly much less famous. It's a clever tactic, one used by the person who created the lists on which Plantard based his own. By masking attention grabbing names amid other less dramatic (though credible in their own right) names, it brings a great sense of legitimacy to the list. It's a sleight of hand trick, applied to a religious hoax.

But that is not the end of the matter. There are further documents created by Plantard that expand on his list of Grand Masters. One of these is named Le Cercle d'Ulysse and it was also a falsified and planted piece of so-called evidence. It mentions that Francois Ducaud-Bourget is the latest in the long name of Grand Masters. But Francois Ducaud-Bourget was not just another name. In fact, it was the name of a man whom Plantard knew personally. He had been a Catholic priest and was known as having been something of a traditionalist. Plantard had worked for the man as a sexton during the Second World War. Plantard named him as the Grand Master following the

death of Jean Cocteau. It's an example of the hoaxer drawing the circle in tightly around himself. Alongside claims Plantard made of having Merovingian heritage, he was using events from his own life as a means of providing foundations for an elaborate hoax.

But it did not take long for the *Dossiers Secrets* to be exposed as fraudulent. While many tests are available that can ascertain the age of a particular document or piece of paper (useful when assessing purportedly ancient sources), this was not relevant to the *Dossiers Secrets*. With it running all the way up to the modern day, there was little need for Plantard to claim it was anything other than an updated list belonging to an ancient order. But that did not mean that it was not easily proven wrong. It was traced back to Plantard's hand and, after other members of the group confessed to the hoax, it was not long before the lie was exposed (at least in France.) But during the early stages of the exposed hoax, Plantard kept decidedly quiet. He was very much involved in every aspect of the conspiracy and it should have been no surprise to anyone to see that Plantard was able to produce a second, revised list of Grand Masters. During one 1989 revival of the story of the Priory of Sion, Plantard presented his new list to the public. The first list, he knew, was discredited, so the second was a slightly more reserved affair. Gone are names such as Leonardo da Vinci and Isaac Newton, while the new list seems to have a decidedly more French orientation. What's more, it only traces the Grand Masters back to the 1600s, making less grand claims than the first *Dossiers Secrets*. By 1993, however, this list was also confirmed as a hoax.

The fame of the Grand Masters is one of the most memorable aspects of the Priory of Sion. When people are investigating the mystery for themselves, one of the major points of focus is the celebrity of those involved. If it was enough to welcome in some of the greatest thinkers, the hoax suggests, then surely there must be some credibility to the matter. In doing so, the hoax plays on the famous intellect of the purported members and borrows legitimacy from their actual accomplishments to make the Priory of Sion seem more real.

While this is perhaps the headline-grabbing feature of the Priory of Sion (thanks to *The Da Vinci Code*, it is at least as famous as the idea of a divine bloodline), it is likely that the list of the Grand Masters attracted far too much attention. When the organization was nothing more than the clandestine protectors of a conspiratorial idea, then it was almost impossible to disprove in any complete capacity. But the involvement of such famous names adds yet another way of disproving Plantard's elaborate hoax. Various scholars, researchers, and academics have demonstrated with consummate ease why various members of the list could not be involved for reasons such as geographic location, ideological inclination, or simply that they were dead at the time they were meant to be heading up a secret society. In that respect, Plantard seems to have overreached in this ambition. The people he hoped to involve in the Priory of Sion were almost too famous for his own good.

The Da Vinci Code

Along with the fairly easy dismissal of the celebrity Grand Masters, it becomes easy to question yet another appealing aspect of the Priory of Sion: the idea that they hid clues in the medieval, Renaissance, and Enlightenment art in order to hint at the secret they kept hidden. If we know that Leonardo da Vinci was in no way involved with the Priory of Sion, it becomes relatively straightforward to dismiss the idea that he hid clues to the organization's existence within his artwork.

The idea already fails to hold up under close examination. The concept of hiding clues inside some of the world's most popular pieces of art seems reasonable enough, until it becomes clear that these clues are said to point towards the existence of a secret society. Any organization that truly wanted to remain in the dark and away from the mainstream would be better served by hiding false clues or even no clues at all in the various works. However, thanks to the fact that the list was proven to be false, it can easily be dismissed.

The notion does point towards why the Priory of Sion has become an enduring myth, however. One need only look at *The Da Vinci Code* for confirmation. *The Da Vinci Code* was released in 2003. By this point in time, the Priory of Sion and everything written in *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* had already been proven false. It was a known hoax, though perhaps not a famous one. The way in which the book presented the existence of the Priory managed to convince a certain section of its readership that there might be some truth behind the conspiracy. In fact, it followed many of the same steps we have already covered in this book and attributed to Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln.

But what *The Da Vinci Code* did do was introduce the idea of the Priory of Sion to a new generation. More than a decade had passed between the release of Dan Brown's book and *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. This meant that there was a huge number of people to whom the Priory of Sion was not a known quantity. There were also those who had heard of many of the theories, but had perhaps not heard of the proven falsities that had come out in the wake of the hoax's reveal. That meant that Dan Brown was able to recapture some of the intrigue and fascination that so managed to catch people the first time around. In doing so, he was even able to make a great deal of money.

And, typically, that is where the myth of the Priory of Sion returns. Even though it has already been proven to be false, at least three distinct groups of people have managed to make money using the idea. There is the original band of French hoaxers, there are the authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, and there is Dan Brown and his publishers. Either knowingly (in the case of the original hoaxers) or unknowingly (supposedly in the remaining cases) the conspiracy has been sold to the public on a number of occasions. It has been used to revive the flagging interests of a hotel, to sell a non-fiction book, and to popularise a book and film tie-in of the story of an art professor who solves crimes.

That is without mentioning the scores of people who have written companion books, filmed exploratory documentaries, or even those who offer tours around religious sites in the south of France. On many levels, the

Priory of Sion has proved to be a profitable venture. And for such a supposedly elaborate conspiracy, perhaps that is the real truth. Rather than the Catholic Church waging a war against the descendants of Jesus Christ, the real conspiracy is those who hope to make money from the idea of the Priory of Sion. From websites to jewelery, non-fiction to fiction, people have learned about the story and then hoped to pass it along to others. The real clue hidden in the art work does not point towards the existence of the Priory of Sion, but rather towards its profitability.

Conclusion

Typically, this would be the place to end this book. The hoax has been revealed, the truth outed. The nature of the Priory of Sion has been discussed and its reasoning detailed. But that is not the final chapter of the story. Despite the huge amount of evidence to the contrary, there are still those who are convinced that the Priory of Sion is a legitimate organization and one which still guards a secret to this day. But after everything we have seen and all of the confessions that have been made, how can we possibly believe that someone could seriously invest in this idea?

Some people have pointed to *The Da Vinci Code* as being a source of these problems. However, unlike the original *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, Dan Brown's book did not sit in the history section of the book store. Even though the author opened his book with a claim that everything contained within was true, it was still nestled neatly in the fiction section. There was a reasonable amount of doubt that could be attributed to the information inside, even if the book did perhaps believe in its own mythology. Indeed, Brown's choice of antagonist is telling. While people such as Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln have previously suggested the existence of natural enemies for the Priory of Sion, Brown decided to go a different way entirely. In the Messianic Legacy, Baigent et al suggested that the enemy of the Priory might actually be the Sovereign Order of Malta, tracing potential disagreements back to the Crusades. While it was built on as rocky a foundation as the rest of their work, it did at least feature a reasonable (if poorly researched) suggestion. But Brown ignored that. Instead, he selected as his antagonist the Catholic sect Opus Dei. Though controversial in their own right, Opus Dei had never once been linked with the Priory of Sion in any capacity. It was entirely conjecture, put down to poetic license. In ways such as these, it's easy to see that *The Da Vinci Code* is discredited without too much trouble.

The serious allegations that the Priory of Sion still exists are found firmly out of the non-fiction section. Much like *The Holy Blood and the Holy*

Grail, these books often purport to be serious historical investigations but fail to measure up to the required research standards. One such example *is The Sion Revelation*, written by Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince. The subtitle of the book suggests that readers will learn "the truth about the guardians of Christ's sacred bloodline." The two authors are not without previous work on this kind of topic. Indeed, their 1997 book *The Templar Revelation* is said to have been the chief source used by Dan Brown for ideas about the interplay between the Knights Templar and Leonardo da Vinci. However, *The Sion Revelation* goes much further.

In the book, the authors accept that Pierre Plantard forged much of the evidence for the existence of the Priory of Sion before 1956. This, they say, was deliberate. It was intended to muddy the waters, to blur the lines between reality and fiction. It created a red herring in the minds of the public, who would now know that the Priory of Sion was a hoax. It was a distraction, and a successful one, orchestrated by both Plantard and the people who oversaw his actions.

Instead, they believe that the Priory of Sion was nothing more than a cover organization for a modern political movement. The group hopes to unite the nations of Europe into a new world power, much like the Priory was said to have been doing for years. But their activities are secret. In setting up such a complex hoax, Plantard and the rest of the real Priory were able to distract the public from their efforts. It is a real conspiracy, hidden behind a forged conspiracy that was supposed to be real. But like many examples of Priory of Sion-orientated literature found in both book stores and on the internet, there is little to no evidence. Nothing compelling is put forward other than run-of-the-mill conspiratorial ideas. Movements such as these rob the Priory of Sion of its original distinguishing characteristic (the religious concepts) and turn it into another shadowy organization bent on taking over the world. The legacy of the Priory of Sion might be many things, but one of the worst is the latest wave of poorly informed, poorly researched books which claim to know the real truth. While Plantard and his team were cunning in their hoax, the only remaining adherents to theory of the Priory's existence have robbed it of all cleverness. By now, the Priory of Sion is just another entry in the list of standard conspiracy theories. Easily disproven

and easily forgotten, the modern mentions of the Priory pale in comparison to previous efforts.

And that is the state of the Priory of Sion today. In this current climate, they occupy the same mental space as the Illuminati or the Assassins. They are blamed for global (or more specifically, European) conspiracies despite the lack of attention paid to their past. Now functioning in the same way as the Illuminati or the New World Order, any legitimate dismissal of their activities is attributed to false agents and even more levels of conspiracy. But as much as we might have wanted the story of the Priory of Sion to be true, these days we know it was nothing more than an elaborate lie. For now, the various ideas put forward by Plantard, Baigent, Lincoln, and Leigh will be consigned to the forgotten histories. For such a contrived construction, this might be more than anyone ever expected.

Further Readings

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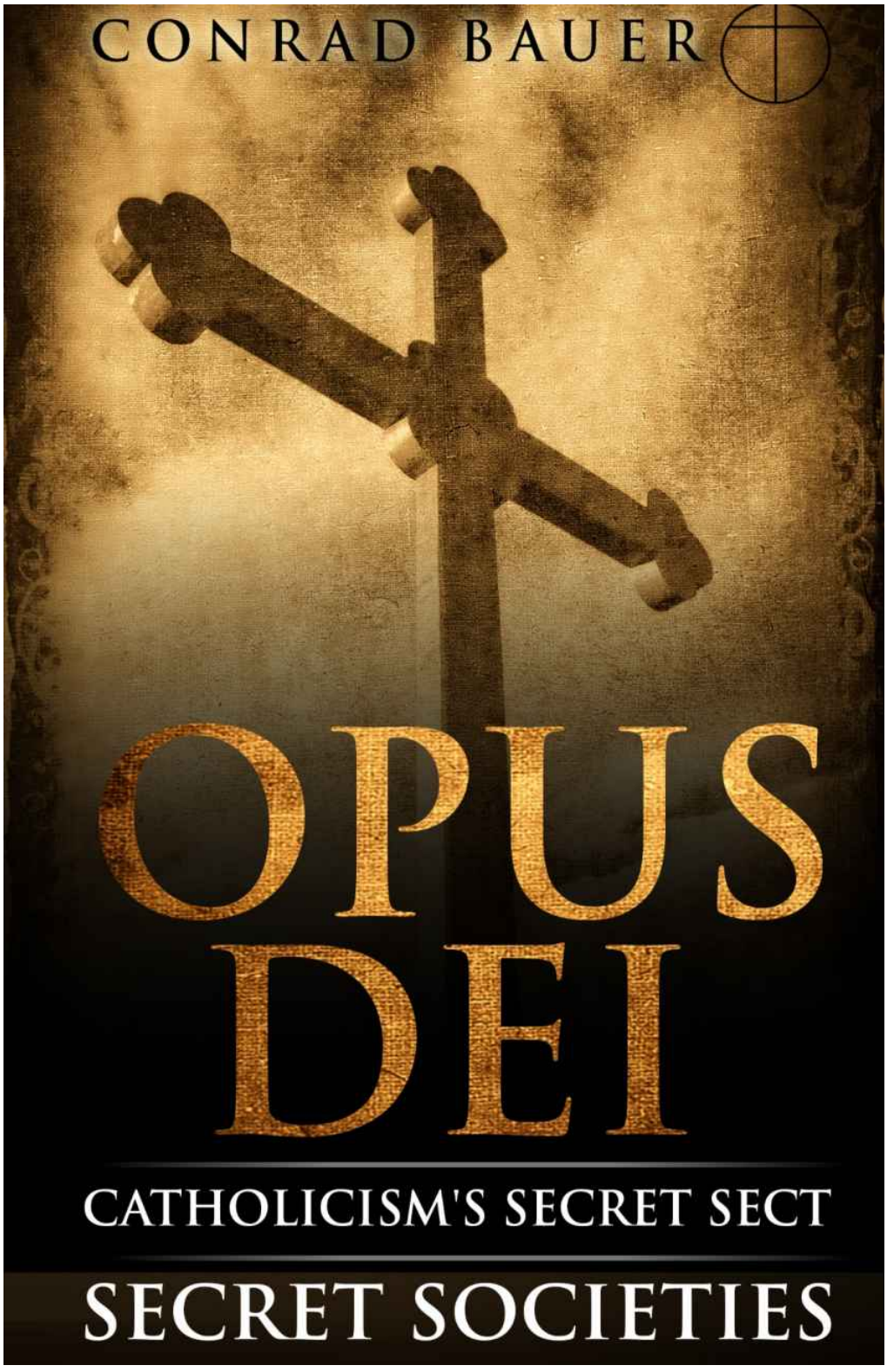
CONRAD BAUER
OPUS DEI
CATHOLICISM'S SECRET SECT
SECRET SOCIETIES

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Introduction

Of the billion or so Catholics in the world, the members of Opus Dei constitute almost a hundredth of one percent. Though their numbers might be relatively minuscule, their reputation is many orders of magnitude greater. While the guiding lights of the Church have taken a more genial, modern approach to religion in the last century, the members of Opus Dei have stuck rigidly to the traditions of old. In doing so, they have become known as the hardcore. The fiercely devoted. The stringently religious. Unmoving, distant, and utterly compelling. In an age when the Vatican is reaching out to many millions of people worldwide, Opus Dei seems to be shrouded in secrecy, a secret sect that adheres to the ancient practices of Christianity.

Perhaps because of this adherence to the older models of Christianity, the group has come to represent the most devoted and most controversial of all Catholic arms. its practices are said to include ancient languages, self-flagellation, corporal mortification, aggressive recruiting, controlling the free will of members, cult-like behavior, misogynistic policies, support of fascists, and many more secrets hidden away within the organization's walls.

In this book, we will attempt to look deeply into the hidden history of Catholicism's most radical and divisive sect. Using ancient texts, accounts of former members, extensive research, and secret documents, we will discover the truth behind Opus Dei. If you would like to learn more about this zealous, sometimes terrifying organization, then read on. For the truth behind Catholicism's secret sect, this book is all you will ever need.

Getting to Know the Work of God

Before we begin our in-depth study of Opus Dei, we should take the time to get a general overview of the organization itself. It is commonly misunderstood, and there are many rumors, conspiracy theories, and superstitions that surround the institution and its practitioners. If we are to discover the truth, then it is important to understand the basics.

The name itself is Latin. Translated, Opus Dei means “Work of God.” That gives us an insight into the core belief of the group. That is to say, it is their belief that God is not limited solely to the Church. Instead, one can infuse their own work with a sanctity and a dedication to religion at all times. Whether you’re an engineer, a plumber, or a schoolteacher, the work that you carry out as an Opus Dei member is dedicated to God. There is a religious appreciation of the mundane details of life, often giving the appearance of religious fervor that can appear odd to the outsider. Together, the members of the church and its clergy dedicate their lives and their work to the divine power. Literally, the day-to-day lives of members becomes the eponymous work of God.

But Opus Dei is so much more than this. Over time, the group has come to embody long-standing criticisms of Catholicism and the history of organized religion. It has become associated with a biblical literalism and a staunchly conservative mind-set. There have even been suggestions of a global conspiracy network. But how to these ideas relate to the basic principles of Opus Dei?

It is true, certainly, that a traditional problem of Opus Dei has been communicating their message to the layman. Often, the organization focuses on promoting what it is not, rather than what it is. This gives Opus Dei a defensive appearance, which – somewhat paradoxically – leads more people to become even more suspicious than ever before. To find out more about what Opus Dei actually is, let's go back to the very beginning.

The date is October 2nd, 1928. A young Spanish priest named Josemaria Escriva makes a retreat to a secluded monastery in Madrid. Inside the

Vincentian institution, he has a vision. The details of the vision seem strange, but Escriva is left with no doubt what he must do. After the experience, he is inspired to create his own organization, an order that would eventually become Opus Dei.

The vision of the Spanish priest was the inspiration for Opus Dei. Josemaria Escriva, the man who would later be regarded as the founder of the organization, would have subsequent visions, in which the further details of God's plan were laid out to him. Part of these visions seemed to give Escriva the general overall idea of Opus Dei, while others were more specific. There should be a dedicated branch for women, there should be an organized body of priests, and many other details that would go on to shape the structure and principles of the church. But these would all come later. According to Escriva himself, the original vision contained the essential elements of Opus Dei.

October the 2nd is a special day. It is a recognized day within the Catholic Church, known as the Feast of the Guardian Angels. It was on this day that Escriva received his vision. His own description of the event remembers that it was a feast day. According to the priest's description of his vision, it was on this day that the "Lord willed" that Opus Dei as a group "might come to be." Furthermore, he went on to describe the vision as one that told him of an organization in which men and women were willing to make a sacrifice of themselves for other people, in order to make sure all of the "ways of man" were divine and that every "upright work" would be suitably sanctified. Even if he did not have the structural backing, it clear to see that Escriva had the central tenants of what would prove to be a controversial interpretation of Catholicism.

It's important that Opus Dei's beginnings are the result of seemingly divine inspiration. Escriva's vision provided him and his followers with a holy mandate, a conviction in the importance of the organization's work. Opus Dei, as such, is an extension of God's will. So much so, in fact, that Escriva himself has denied being the actual founder of the group, instead saying that Opus Dei was "founded in spite of [him]" rather than because of him. The origins of the name itself are equally as parochial, with the group going

unnamed before an apparently offhand, random comment from Escriva's confessor struck a chord with the priest. When he asked Escriva how the "work of God" was going, Escriva realized quickly that this was to be the name. As such, members now refer to the Church simply as "the Work."

At a foundational level, there is a simple message to Opus Dei's work. It's the same one that was revealed in the vision and built upon in subsequent decades. That is to say, it is the goal of the members to sanctify the ordinary lives of people by living as taught by the gospels and the Church to the fullest extent possible. This is not too far from the belief that most Catholics would espouse, but the group takes their ideas to a more extreme conclusion that most worshippers.

To sum up their aims, Opus Dei members chose as their symbol a simple circle with a cross inside. The circle – representing the world – is sanctified from within. To the members, the idea of being holy is not something that is limited to the higher-ups of the Catholic Church or to the saints, but it is the potential destiny of every single Christian. It's not just the clergy, the nuns, the priests, the saints, or anyone else associated with the Church who are holy. Instead, it's something that is available to everyone in the world. Together, they can sanctify everybody, just as their logo suggests.

But this idea is not just expressed through the normal, typically religious actions such as praying. Instead, small and mundane parts of day-to-day life can become expressions of worship. In particular, one's work should be devoted to the Lord, whether you're an accountant or a construction worker. This is where the beliefs of the Opus Dei members begin to deviate from the path of the traditional Catholic adherents.

But the work of Escriva did not go unnoticed. As he was setting up his organization, he earned himself many admirers. People saw both the priest and his followers as being necessarily pious. Fans included the late Pope John Paul II, who would later describe the man as being ahead of his time. Giovanni Benelli – once the cardinal of Florence – would go on to have many doctrinal disagreements with Escriva, but he still saw fit to compare him with another founder of a dedicated group of Catholics, Saint Ignatius

of Loyola, who founded the Jesuit order in the 16th Century. According to Benelli, Escriva similarly managed to translate contemporary discussions within the Catholic Church into a codified, dedicated organization.

The comparison to the Jesuits is particularly telling. For centuries, the Jesuits were seen as the most learned, the most devout, and the most dedicated branch of the clergy. Though many disagreed with some of their practices – or even their very existence – there were many who saw the Jesuits as being absolutely necessary. For many Catholics, the simple existence of the Jesuits was comforting. It was reassuring to know that there were people on Earth who were suitably dedicated to God, suitably pure enough to preach his word and to investigate the ways in which modern life intersected with theology. To many people, Opus Dei filled a similar niche. As their reputation grew – initially within the Catholic community – they developed their reputation for dedicated religious practice. It is out of this dedication that their more controversial elements began to emerge.

Trying to get a grip of the more theological elements can be tough. For anyone who has studied the intricacies of the Catholic doctrine, there are a number of smaller, more refined points where Opus Dei moves away from mainstream religious thinking. For the majority of people, however, it can be difficult to note the key differences between the majority of Catholic thought and the particular practices of Escriva's organization.

Opus Dei members have, on a number of occasions, attempted to publicly clarify their idiosyncratic beliefs. In 2004, for example, an interview with Fernando Ocariz (at the time, the second-highest ranking member of Opus Dei) made an effort to clarify some of Escriva's teachings. The "universal call to holiness" that defines the organization can be split into two distinct parts: the subjective and the objective. The subjective invites people to sanctification. In other words, anyone – regardless of who they are – is called to become a saint. The objective is part of this, in that it states that everything in the world and every element of the human experience can be used to move someone closer toward becoming a saint. For Opus Dei members, every action and every situation is a chance to move closer towards sainthood.

Typically, most Catholics would see sainthood as being something that is limited to only the most holy people. Looking through the traditional pantheon of saints, they were typically priests, monks, or nuns. But for Opus Dei, this is not a limitation. All members, should they follow the Opus Dei teachings, can become saints in their own right. Borrowing words and phrases from the Bible's famous Song of Songs, Escriva himself sought to find God "in the things that come from outside," that is to say, the general day-to-day minutiae of life and work.

But there was a theological drive on the part of Opus Dei's creator. Escriva is on the record as describing his organization as being an "intravenous injection" directly into the "bloodstream of society." The image is vivid and speaks of how great a shock he saw Opus Dei as causing. Escriva wanted to make his group different from the common views of the church, and even in the early days, went to great lengths to ensure that he was able to differentiate Opus Dei from the typical Catholic denominations.

There's a story told about the first three priests who were ordained by Opus Dei. The three men – all Spanish priests – were chosen by Escriva himself to represent the organization. The attention to detail was so great that Escriva noticed that not a single man out of the three smoked cigarettes. In Spain at the time, smoking was commonplace. The fact that none of the three priests smoked made Escriva concerned. What if people believed that the priests didn't smoke due to their membership in Opus Dei? People might believe that not smoking was a part of the belief system, something that was not true. After some discussion, it was decided that one of the three men would take up smoking so as to pacify any concerns the general public might have had. It was not that Opus Dei were anti or pro cigarettes, more that it was concerned with reaching as many people as possible. The man chosen to smoke was Alvaro del Portillo, the man who would later take on Escriva's role as the head of the organization.

In a similar vein, it was decided that the priests would forgo the traditional Catholic attire, dressing instead in simpler clothes. They would not be cloistered, meaning that groups of priests would not live solitary, excluded

lifestyles. Perhaps most importantly, all of the priests in Opus Dei would not claim that it had some special, sanctimonious state of life. That is to say, they were no more predisposed to sainthood than anyone else, regardless of their occupation. Rather than removing themselves from the world, these priests hoped to "Christianize" everything, hoping that their spiritual actions would set a precedent for other people to follow.

This approach was certainly revolutionary for its time. In Spain in the 1930s and 1940s, when Escriva was developing the foundations of Opus Dei, the traditional model of the Catholic Church would be considered a clergy-orientated organization. This means that the clergy would be religious leaders, elevated above the people in terms of their sanctity. For Escriva, this seemed wrong. Instead, Opus Dei focused on a model in which the clergy were on equal footing in all regards. Rather than leading people through religion, the priests were designed to act in a more supporting role. They were experts who could provide guidance and direction, rather than leaders who would strut at the head of the pack. Once the priests provided the laypeople with an understanding of God, it was down to the individual to decide how their particular actions could be made into an offering to the Lord.

In principle, this idea would suggest that Opus Dei is an organization focused on equality. As we will see later in this book, the balance between men and women in the Opus Dei has faced much criticism. In theory, female Opus Dei members receive the same spiritual coaching and direction as their male counterparts, and they are equally capable of achieving sainthood through their actions. But in many of the smaller details, the Opus Dei attitude towards women is far from an equilateral balance. At the time, however, this attitude towards equality was a marked change from the mainstream. For many centuries, the Catholic Church has had a major issue with gender equality. Even this small doctrinal change by Escriva was a step towards equality, even if the ensuing decades have revealed inherent issues with gender that were not apparent at the time.

Such breaks from the mainstream Catholic doctrine led to many people criticizing Escriva. In certain parts of Spanish society, he was denounced as

being anti-clerical. Some went as far as to call him a heretic. Rumors began to circulate that he would be reported to the Vatican, the spiritual center of the Catholic world, presumably in the belief that he would be apprehended, punished, and likely excommunicated. Even in its early days, Opus Dei was controversial.

For most people, trying to come to terms with Opus Dei as an organization can be difficult. It is unlike almost every other branch of Christianity, and this seems to be intentional. Escriva himself described Opus Dei as "a disorganized organization." The people in the group are united by their shared interpretation of Catholicism and their belief in sanctifying the world from within. There is a frequently repeated phrase that gives an insight into the decentralized nature of the group: "Opus Dei doesn't act; its members do."

But is this true? Long-time critics of Opus Dei have suggested that this pretense of decentralized, independent members is a myth. Instead, Opus Dei does indeed have an intention, an organization, and a set of goals, all of which are hidden behind the smokescreen of general theology. While the majority of members might ascribe to Escriva's original vision, others are focused on seizing power, gaining financial wealth, or recruiting new members. All of these actions are kept hidden away from the public, who seem happy to believe that Opus Dei is just a particularly dedicated sect of the Catholic Church. With both sides of the argument adamant about its version of the truth, it might help to learn more about the individual requirements of each and every member. In the next chapter, we will look at what it takes to become a fully paid-up member of Opus Dei.

Joining Opus Dei

The rising profile of Opus Dei has led to a surge in the number of people who have simply walked in off the street and asked to join. A far cry from the organization's humble roots, these walk-ins have become a new phenomenon that the group has had to deal with. For a long time, the less publicized nature of Opus Dei meant that there were fewer people who even knew about them, let alone thought about joining. But is becoming a member as easy as simply strolling into your local office?

If you did decide to walk into an Opus Dei office one day and declare your intention to become a member, the first thing people would tell you is that education is important. To become a member, you should first discover more about the church's true message. However, the general path to membership does not follow this pattern. Perhaps unlike most religions, the idea of converting is not that familiar. Typically, people become members through association. This might be through a friend or a family member who is already part of Opus Dei, or through being exposed to one of the more "corporate" works, which can include schools and youth centers set up by the organization. Though there are certainly those who declare their intentions to join the group seemingly out of the blue, the majority of people are recruited through a process of friendship and association.

Once this bond is formed, then there is a gradual process of exposure. If a person has hinted to an Opus Dei member that they might be interested in joining, then they will be invited to attend meetings, either evening gatherings or retreats. At these events, the person will gain an insight into the day-to-day reality of the religion, learning how it fits into members' lives. Within the church, the code name for a recruit official joining is "whistle." When a person decides to "whistle," the moment is treated with the utmost seriousness. Opus Dei considers itself neither a hobby nor a pastime. It demands serious commitment from members, so the decision to "whistle" is regarded as a life-changing moment.

But if this decision is so important, where is the appeal for the everyday person? What could prompt a layperson to make such a massive decision? It might seem overtly simple to say that the call is a religious one. There are those who say that God pushed them in a certain, specific direction. However, there are often other factors at play. For some people, the writings that Escriva left behind have provided an inspiration. Certainly, those who have been initially interested in the church admit to having their curiosity consecrated when reading his ideas and theories about religion and work. Similarly, there is a notion that Opus Dei is able to offer a strain of religion that is both serious and supportive of the devout Catholic approach to life. Witnessing fist hand the devotion of the members, traditional Catholics might be convinced of the organization's authenticity.

Opus Dei differs from traditional religious orders in that there are no vows to be taken upon joining, as you might expect when becoming a monk or nun. Under Church law, a member's status remains exactly as it was before. Instead, Opus Dei solidifies membership using a more secular means. When joining, recruits are asked to sign a contract, entering into an agreement. The agreement states that the person will agree to live their lives in the spirit of Opus Dei, supporting the activities and doctrine that the organization sets out. In return, Opus Dei will provide spiritual formation and guidance in the way of God.

Though the contracts differ from country to country and from language to language, they are arranged in a basic formula. First, the person will announce that they are operating under their own free will and that they will, from this point onwards, dedicate themselves to the pursuit of sanctity at all times. They also pledge to "practice apostolate" in accordance with the "spirit and praxis of Opus Dei." Then, they submit to remaining under the jurisdiction of Opus Dei and dedicate themselves faithfully to the "special purposes" of the organization. Agreeing to all of Opus Dei's traditions and laws, the person finishes the contract by offering to serve under the Prelature (the local administrative branch) at all times.

In turn, the Church will offer their own contract. In return for the above dedication, the representative of the Prelate will promise to fulfil a number

of obligations on the part of Opus Dei. There is a promise to "devote constant care and attention" to spiritual, doctrinal, and other religious needs. Then, there is a promise to "fulfil Opus Dei's obligations to its faithful;" that is to say, a promise to assist other members of the church in addition to this single signee.

The use of the contract is an indicator of the unique relationship between Opus Dei and its members. It's been seen as a dubious practice by those who are critical of Opus Dei, and in truth, it certainly differentiates them from the other organizations within the Catholic Church. In theory, the contract has little legal value. It does not permit, for example, members to be representatives of Opus Dei in their day-to-day lives, nor does it attempt to have any influence or control beyond spiritual guidance. But that has not stopped the speculation.

The contract has received a lot of attention from critics, but at least some of the critical speculation can be dismissed out of hand. In some of the more conspiratorial corners of the internet, discussions about contracts signed in blood and the selling of the soul have been linked with Opus Dei. Of all the contracts that have been made public – and there is no clause or tradition preventing them from being revealed – neither of these factors have been present. They are simply part of the urban legend commonly associated with Opus Dei.

But other critics often point towards the possibility that the "spiritual guidance" that Opus Dei promises to provide can be corrupting. If, for example, a member was in a particularly high-powered position, people have pointed at the clauses within the contract and suggesting that the organization might attempt to influence a person's work for the benefit of Opus Dei. This might be closing a big business deal or enacting a piece of legislature, either of which could either be profitable for Opus Dei or could ratify elements of their ideology. Opus Dei's contract, the critics say, provides them with the power to intervene and influence members in a professional capacity. The Work of God, as suggested within the contract, is one and the same as the work of the individual.

There is little evidence to support this claim, however. Indeed, those members of the church whom we know to have held powerful positions have not only dismissed the suggestion, but have declared that the opposite is true. Luis Valls, for example, was both the chairman of Spain's third largest commercial bank and a member of Opus Dei. In charge of a company worth almost $50 billion, he says he was never told what to do by anyone within the organization. In fact, he claims, the spiritual guidance of Opus Dei helped to keep him on the right moral track. Without Opus Dei, Valls says, he would have been a "rascal."

While it might not seem to be too controversial, this element of the Opus Dei operation can be one of the most criticized. The recruitment of new members is something that is often little understood and has caused a great deal of speculation in many circles. How does the group pick is targets? Are they too pushy and intimidating in their recruitment? What is their long-term goal? We will examine some of these accusations in a later chapter, but some people have made the claim that Opus Dei resembles a cult. As we continue with our basic overview of the organization, this can be something that is worth keeping in mind, before we directly address the issue later.

First, we should look at the idea of "whistling." In its purest sense, whistling refers to the act of writing a letter, asking to join Opus Dei. It's a formal process, known in documentation as "requesting admission." The term "whistling," however, was used by Escriva himself, in reference to the whistling sound made by steam escaping from a boiling kettle. Just as the water had reached a boiling point and is ready to pour, the prospective member has reached their own point of readiness. Age doesn't really matter. Whistling is possible from the ages of sixteen and a half upwards. However, there is a requirement that an individual must be eighteen years old before they can formally be incorporated into the church. Indeed, from fourteen and a half years old, it is possible to register as an "aspirant," in preparation for more formal inclusion at an older age. Whistling is not guaranteed to work. It's not uncommon for prospective members to write a number of letters before Opus Dei deems them ready to continue with their formal application.

The next step is admission. Once the formal application has been approved, there is a short ceremony for members. The process involves two members of Opus Dei, typically a priest and a lay director. These two people will listen to the prospective member's verbal pledge to live their life "in the spirit" of Opus Dei, who in turn will promise to provide means of spiritual formation. This ceremony typically occurs six months after the whistling, during which time the person has lived their life as an informal Opus Dei member, following the ideas of the organization and being treated as a member.

Once admission is complete, a person will move on to "oblation." This usually takes place eighteen months after a person has whistled, and it marks the signing of the contract between an individual and Opus Dei. This commitment is set for annual renewal, usually on the 19th of March. The date is important in the Catholic Church as it is the Feast of St. Joseph, who is said to be the patron saint of workers and Opus Dei alike. The oblation is not considered a permanent agreement, though those who choose to break it and turn away from Opus Dei are treated seriously. Within the church, this is a "grave matter," a seemingly purposefully broad statement. The oblation is done privately in tandem with personal prayer. Once a member has renewed their agreement, they are required to tell the organization. If they do not, then they are automatically disavowed and are no longer considered a member.

Being a member of Opus Dei is an ongoing commitment. Unlike many other churches in which one might be able to dip in and out as it pleases, there is a need for constant reapplication to the organization. One such commitment is the "fidelity," which takes places five years after the completion of the first oblation. It's a lifetime commitment to Opus Dei, though it only needs to be made once. As soon as it is complete, then the person is considered to be a permanent member of Opus Dei, part of the "supernatural family." After this point, leaving the organization becomes more difficult. Departing members are required to write a formal letter, though those who are more desperate to leave have been known to skip this step. Due to the age restrictions on whistling and oblation, the minimum age for the fidelity is 23, though there is no upper limit on age.

Once you have become a member, you will join the ranks of some 85,000 Opus Dei practitioners worldwide. These are the numbers kept by the Vatican itself, which keeps track of the involvement of people within the organization. Of the 85,000, just under 2,000 are priests. The ratio of priests to clergy is close to roughly 45:1. But within the main body of the laity, the membership can be broken down even further. The distinctions between the categories of members in Opus Dei are usually arranged by the organization in terms of how available a certain person is for church activities. Typical distinctions based on careers, employment, or "grades" of devoutness and holiness are not present. Instead, the categories are:

1. Supernumeraries and numeraries, and another subset, numerary assistants
2. Associates
3. Cooperators (who are not members, but do support Opus Dei.)

It's terms such as these that have often given people cause to compare Opus Dei to a secret society. The idea of structured membership is something that is present in groups such as the Freemasons, especially as the names for the categories are not familiar to most. In fact, they are taken from Opus Dei's Spanish background, being the nomenclature used for the types of professor at a university. It's somewhat ironic that a stylistic choice that was meant to make Opus Dei more relatable and ordinary has, in the 21st Century, had the opposite effect.

Let's take a look at the individual categories, starting with the **supernumeraries**. This is the category that includes roughly 70% of Opus Dei members. Due to the way in which categorization works, these are the individuals whom the church considers least available. Whether it's family commitments or the like, supernumeraries have distinctly less time to dedicate to the church. Because of this, they live in their homes, just like a regular person might. In a marriage, it's possible for both partners to be supernumeraries or just one. For supernumeraries, spiritual direction is received from an Opus Dei numerary – typically the director of the local center – and confession is conducted by an Opus Dei priest.

In terms of public attention, the supernumeraries are perhaps the unheralded majority of Opus Dei. While they are overwhelmingly in the majority, the focus usually sways to the numeraries or the priests. There are some, however, who claim that it is the supernumeraries who are the real force within the church. In terms of Opus Dei's objective of transforming the way we live our everyday lives, the supernumeraries represent that policy in action. The sheer number of supernumeraries is closer to the church's long-term objectives like setting up a charity school.

Part of the responsibility of the supernumeraries is the financial contributions they are expected to make to Opus Dei. These are handled on a personal basis. While the well-off might make large contributions, those who are less financially privileged will not be expected to match their contributions. These are handled on a "pay what you can afford" type of arrangement. It's something of a misconception that the majority of Opus Dei members are upper-middle class, white collar workers. While this might be true for many members, the organization spans far more of the social spectrum than might be expected. This is what helps contribute to the idea of the "hidden majority" that some have used to criticize Opus Dei.

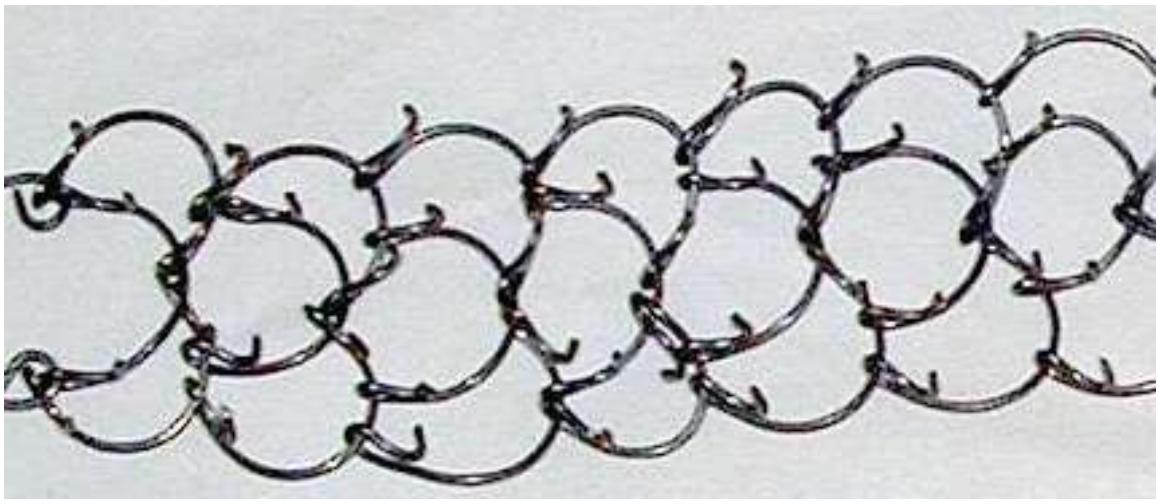
In addition to being members of Opus Dei, it is not uncommon for supernumeraries to continue to hold a place in other religious organizations. They remain active in their local parishes and dioceses, with many actively contributing to the community as members of the parish council, as lectors, leaders of youth groups, and many other positions. Opus Dei, for these individuals, is not an exclusive commitment and can function in tandem with previous involvement in church organizations. However, if the supernumeraries are the presentable face of the Opus Dei membership, then it is the numeraries themselves who attract the vast majority of the attention from the outside world.

The **numeraries** form roughly 20% of the Opus Dei membership. Chiefly, they are comprised of members who have dedicated themselves to the Opus Dei family. To be one of the numeraries, one must make a series of pledges. These include commitments of celibacy, and in some cases, giving up a

career to work full time for Opus Dei. For the majority of numeraries, however, a position outside of the church is common, though professions typically involve some degree of professional expertise. This means that many are surgeons, lawyers, writers, or similarly focused careerists. From these professions, any money that is not required to live is passed to the coffers of Opus Dei and used for church activities. For many American numeraries, this has led to issues with the IRS, in which the taxmen find it incomprehensible that people could make such large charitable donations, sometimes as much as three-quarters of a yearly salary.

Numeraries are known to enjoy a more rigorous, extensive education in religious, spiritual, and theological matters. Because of this, they are often entrusted with a greater number of leadership positions within the church. In the case of an Opus Dei center, for example, only a numerary is permitted to take on the role of director. Sometimes, this education extends to sending numeraries to Rome, so that they will be able to study theology in a formal setting, often at the famous University of the Holy Cross.

Of all the numeraries, there is an even smaller subset who are known as the "inscripti." These Opus Dei members are trusted enough to offer doctrinal and spiritual formation to other church members. They play a notable part in the importance of the numeraries and Opus Dei in general. When the organization is hoping to expand into a new area, a certain number of numeraries and inscripti are required in order to lay the foundations for the new center. The geographical expansion of Opus Dei depends upon these dedicated members in order to maintain a certain level of religious and spiritual commitment and consistency.



But the numeraries are also important in that it is often their practices that draw the attention of those most critical of Opus Dei. As we will see later in this book, a number of their most controversial practices involved self-flagellation and corporal discipline. The "cilice," for example, is a small chain fitted with rows of metal spikes. It is fastened on the upper thigh of the numeraries for a few hours each day (excluding Sundays and feast days). The spikes dig into the flesh and cause the wearer pain. In addition to the cilice, there is the "discipline." The discipline is the name for the short whip, used once a week during prayer time. The user whips the cord-like device across their back during the Our Father, again causing pain.

Becoming a numerary is a demanding position. It not only requires a great deal of spiritual and financial commitment, but the self-punishment aspect of the practice stands out among almost all Christian denominations. It's this pain-inducing mode of worship that draws the attention of outsiders, but as we will soon discover, it is done with a certain religious purpose. It's a demonstration of the commitment demanded of the numeraries by Opus Dei and makes many people distrustful of their activities. However, the numeraries do not work alone.

The **numerary assistants** are another subset of the Opus Dei membership structure. Numbering close to 4,000 and all of them women, the numerary assistants are another seemingly-strange branch of the Opus Dei membership. These women are known for their full-time devotion to the

running of the Opus Dei centers and the other facilities that are owned and operated by the Organization. While the numeraries might live in an Opus Dei center while working a full-time job, the numerary assistants will remain within the center and handle chores such as cooking or cleaning, as well as the financial management of the center. The position has been likened to that of a full-time mother, which is often the way the numerary assistants themselves see the position.

The idea for this position has often been attributed to Escriva's own family life. The founder wanted all Opus Dei centers to have the feeling of a home rather than an organization. In order to accomplish this, he decided that they would require "a woman's touch." The women who fill these positions are paid for their work, which is regarded by Opus Dei as a full-time position. When carrying out the work around the center, numerary assistants typically have a uniform that signifies their position. While cooking or cleaning in an Opus Dei center, it's possible to recognize the numerary assistants purely through their choice of clothing.

But this is yet another position that has drawn negative attention to Opus Dei. The role and the requirements of the numerary assistants has been described as outdated and sexist, suggestive of a regressive view of women. Opus Dei, say numerous critics, is responsible for promoting a submissive and harmfully traditionalist view of gender roles. This is not helped when, in defense of their organization, Opus Dei members have suggested that they are not discriminating by simply noting women's skills in the domestic sphere. It is a skillset that they firmly believe men lack. Added to this, the role of the numerary assistants is part of Escriva's original vision for Opus Dei and not open to debate. It's perhaps not unexpected that such a hardline, traditionalist branch of the Catholic Church should hold outdated ideas of gender roles, but it certainly becomes another stick with which critics can beat Opus Dei when required. The organization does not help themselves with responses, but these practices often seem outdated rather than suspicious in the minds of many of the more critical opponents of Opus Dei.

The **associates** are a group within Opus Dei who are similar to the numeraries. Just like the numeraries, they remain celibate, though they often have family members and personal reasons as to why they live away from Opus Dei centers. The most important distinction to make between associates and numeraries is their living arrangements. Other than one group living in the Opus Dei centers and one group enjoying more conventional residence, they have the same spiritual expectations. They can both work in almost any position, providing they do so in a manner that complies with the organization's view on work as a tribute to God. It might be that an associate has younger brothers or sisters who depend on them being at home, or that the associate's particular career path has taken them to a part of the world without a local Opus Dei center. It's possible to move between groups, going from being a supernumerary to an associate depending on current circumstances.

An important role within the church that we have yet to mention is that of the **priests**. With just under two thousand clergy members "incardinated" into the Opus Dei organization, they are not the largest division within the Catholic Church by any means. A central authority – known as the prelate – resides in Rome and acts as the guiding figure for the Opus Dei priests. Typically, an Opus Dei priest will carry out the conventional duties of a Catholic priest, including pastoral care, running the parish affairs, and organizing Church activities. They might occasionally hold teaching positions in universities or seminaries. The vast majority of priests have been recruited from the Opus Dei numeraries and differ slightly from most Catholic priests in their relationship to the Church members. Whereas traditionally, priests might be spiritual superiors and leaders, Opus Dei's clergy function in more of a support role.

The priests are assisted by a group known as the **cooperators**. Though not technically Opus Dei members, the cooperators are "friends" of the organization and will often offer their support in a number of ways. This might be through prayer, through organizational assistance, or even through financial donations. The cooperators do not have to be Catholic or even Christian. In a move that has raised more than a few cynical eyebrows, Opus Dei's cooperators are often Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or non-theists.

As a matter of fact, Opus Dei became the first Catholic organization that had the right to enroll people who were not actually Catholics, a law passed in 1950. This has caused criticism from people within the Catholic Church, especially traditionalists. The claim is that such a move makes Opus Dei appear as “indifferentist” (that all religions are of equal validity) and that the order fails to recognize Catholicism as being the foremost among many religions.

However, this has done nothing to dent the number of cooperators whom Opus Dei count around the world. At last count, this number was as high as 164,000, of whom almost 60% are women. Furthermore, there are as many as 900,000 people who are part of an even wider network and involved with Opus Dei, taking part in events and activities, perhaps laying the foundations for eventually being considered as official cooperators. These people swell the ranks of the Opus Dei membership considerably, though it is not only individuals who are counted.

As well as people, Opus Dei has registered almost 500 separate religious communities who are counted as cooperators. These can be men and women, such as communities of monks or nuns, who have formed good working relationships with Opus Dei centers, even if they do not share exactly the same beliefs. A shared spiritual background and a shared effort in building strong bonds with local religious groups means that many Opus Dei centers have fostered cooperative relationships with people and groups in their area. All of this helps with the spreading of the organization’s message.

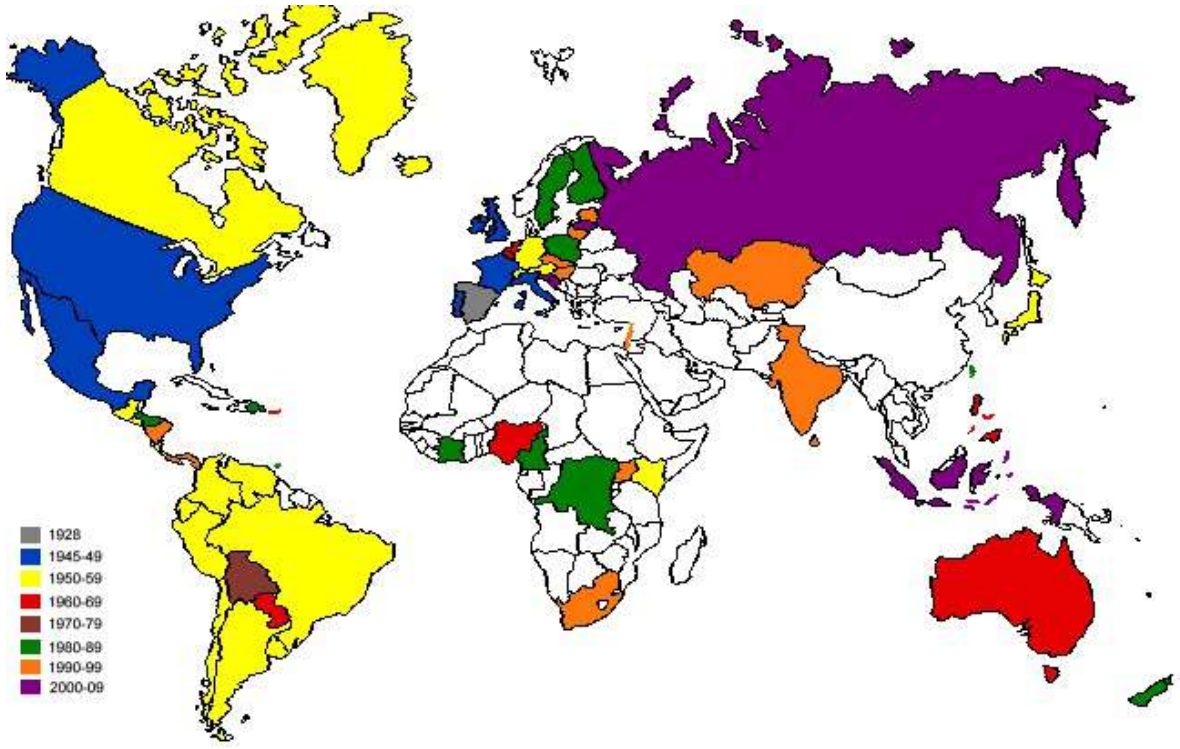
With many diverse roles within Opus Dei and many different people enjoying dissimilar levels of commitment, trying to pin down exact paths to joining the organization can be difficult. Part of this mystery is why so many find the group to be intriguing and different. While most churches will accept anyone through their doors, Opus Dei’s recruitment is markedly different from not only the majority of the Catholic Church, but other religions as well. But this has not held them back. In the next chapter, we will take a look at how the group has spread across the world, as well as a closer look at the man responsible.

A Global Concern

Despite its relatively low membership numbers compared to many other religious organizations, Opus Dei has become a global enterprise. Though its base remains largely in Europe, its growth and expansion has been somewhat remarkable for an organization founded less than a hundred years ago. But where do the majority of their members reside?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the country with by far the most Opus Dei members is Spain. The founder of the organization, Escriva, was a Spanish priest whose once tiny organization has turned into a 35,000 strong group in his home country, mostly in Madrid. This amounts to roughly 40% of the global membership figures. Though Opus Dei was founded in the earliest decades of the 20th Century, initial plans for expansion were hampered by the political situation in Spain. The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, for example, led to utter turmoil in the country and sank many of Escriva's initial plans.

By the 1940s, plans for expansion were set into motion. In 1946, for example, Opus Dei moved into Italy, Portugal, and Great Britain, three of the traditionally most important countries in Europe. This was followed a year later by moves into France and Ireland. In 1949, Opus Dei began to cross the Atlantic Ocean, and centers opened in the USA, Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Colombia, and Venezuela. Throughout the 1950s, the organization continued to expand in Europe and the Americas, moving into Germany, Guatemala, Peru, Ecuador, Uruguay, Switzerland, Brazil, Austria, and Canada. By 1959, the first steps were made into Asia and Africa, with centers opening in Japan and Kenya, as well as El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Holland.



Through the 1960s, Opus Dei expanded into Paraguay, Australia, the Philippines, Belgium, Nigeria, and Puerto Rico, meaning it had a base of operation on almost every continent. This expansion slowed in the 1970s, with only Bolivia being added to the list, though the 1980s saw the Ivory Coast, the Congo, Honduras, Hong Kong, Singapore, Trinidad, Tobago, Sweden, Taiwan, Finland, Cameroon, the Dominican Republic, Macao, New Zealand and Poland added to the list. It was a pattern continued through the 1990s, a time in which Hungary, the Czech Republic, Nicaragua, India, Israel, Lithuania, Estonia, Slovakia, Lebanon, Panama, Uganda, Kazakhstan, and South Africa all became countries hosting Opus Dei centers. In recent years, Slovenia, Croatia, and Lithuania have welcomed Opus Dei. As you can see, over the past seventy years, the rate of expansion has been impressive.

Despite the wide-ranging nature of the above list of countries, it is no surprise to see that the bulk of the membership numbers for Opus Dei comes from countries that have a longstanding relationship with

Catholicism. The list of countries that boast the most Opus Dei members are (in order):

1. Spain
2. Mexico
3. Argentina
4. Italy
5. The United States of America
6. The Philippines
7. Colombia

As you can see, the top three are all Spanish-speaking countries, followed by Italy (home of the Vatican) and the United States (one of the world's most populous countries). There are a number of countries that one might expect to see on the list, but for one reason or another, they have not embraced Opus Dei to the same extent.

The United Kingdom was one of the first places Escriva visited when trying to expand Opus Dei. Indeed, London was one of his favorite cities, and he was heard to refer to it as a "crossroads of the world." Escriva even had favorite museums and churches in the city, in particular the Anglican Church of St. Duncan. The church held the tomb of the Roper family and was the final resting place for the head of St. Thomas More, one of Escriva's heroes. But despite this love of the country and almost six decades spent in Great Britain, Opus Dei has barely more than five hundred British members. On average, they're able to recruit fewer than ten each year. Part of the reason for this might be the work of Cardinal Basil Hume, a priest who warned about the dangers of Opus Dei in a particularly public manner. As Hume's words reached other bishops, and in turn, the Catholics of Britain, the name of Opus Dei was tarnished before they could establish a particularly strong foothold.

It's worth comparing the relative failure in Britain to Opus Dei's success in countries like Peru. In this South American country, the popularity of Opus Dei and of Escriva in particular is slightly astonishing. Despite its small size and its unimportance in geopolitical terms, Peru accounts for close to 2% of

Opus Dei's global membership, almost three times that of Britain. Among these 1,600 people are 400 numeraries and just under 200 associates. There are also 200 priests, 11 active bishops, and even 2 Peruvian Opus Dei bishops who work overseas. This, in particular, is amazing, considering that Peru's Opus Dei bishops amount to roughly a third of the global total.

Peru represents what can happen when the power of Opus Dei is allowed to flourish inside a country. Rather than traditional Catholicism, it's easy to note the prevalence of Opus Dei's influence in the region of Canete. The organization was given a Papal prelature in 1957, allowing Opus Dei to invest the Vatican's money in establishing Church infrastructure in the country. The lasting legacy of this is not only that Opus Dei is overly represented when compared to other countries, but that Escriva's name is held in high reverence throughout Peru.

But now that we know about the global reach of Opus Dei, one question remains on many people's lips. What exactly do Opus Dei members do? In order to earn their reputation as one of the most controversial religious bodies in the world, mustn't their activities garner some attention from the outside world? Again, this is difficult to ascertain. Thus far, we have avoided stepping too far into the controversial secrets of Opus Dei. So far, we have examined the skeletal structure of the Church, taking only a few pauses here and there to note the more controversial elements. This provides us with a firm understanding of the church, so that we will better be able to explore the divisive elements in a later chapter. In much the same way, in order to learn about why Opus Dei remains controversial, we must learn about their activities and what it is that they do on a day-by-day basis.

Whenever you ask Opus Dei members what it is that they "do," you're likely to receive a stock answer. We're already covered the unique nature of Opus Dei's approach to work, in that everything they do should somehow be directed towards sanctification and God. Accordingly, it's not a surprise to hear answers such as work, family, church events, and other general, everyday activities. The only difference is that the members use even non-religious activities to line their path towards holiness. So while even the most mundane answer to the question "what do Opus Dei members do,"

might seem bland and uninteresting, every single response is imbued with the particular theology of the organization. That is to say, Opus Dei members might appear as though they are carrying out typical tasks, but the manner in which they approach said tasks is very different when compared to non-members.

However, while church members might view every activity as part of a greater goal, there are some traditions, rituals, and processes that are taught by the Opus Dei leadership and carried out by most members. Through the course of a typical day, these might be used a number of times.

For example, for many Opus Dei members, the day begins with an offering. The day itself is offered to God in a short prayer, repeating the phrase "I will serve" as an indication of how the day's work will be dedicated to God. After this, members might partake in a daily mass, receiving communion in the traditional Catholic fashion, and then having a praying of the rosary. Following this, many members set aside thirty minutes during both the morning and the evening to have a personal, mental prayer. At noon, this is joined by an Angelus prayer or the Regina Coeli, depending on the time of the year. Every day, members look inwards and examine their own conscience. There is a meditation lasting roughly ten minutes, during which time the individual will consider the recent spiritual teachings they have received, as well as dedicating five minutes of each day to hearing a reading from the New Testament.

Opus Dei members usually pay a daily visit to the Blessed Sacrament, usually following the last meal of the day. This often involves the saying of Our Father's, Hail Mary's, and Glory Be's, all of which are prayers to make up a "spiritual communion." This is the Opus Dei term for any union with Jesus Christ that does not involve the taking of the daily communion. As well as this, there is a set of prayers that are all in Latin. These are named the Preces, and they are said each day, invocating Jesus, Mary, the Holy Spirit, Saint Joseph, Saint José Maria, the Guardian Angels, as well as more conventional prayers for the Pope, the local bishops, anyone who is working to spread the gospel, Opus Dei's prelate, Opus Dei members, and anyone else who might be deserving. Following this, there are invocations

to a number of Saints, such as John, Peter, Paul, Gabriel, Raphael, and Michael.

As you can see, the amount of reflection, prayer time, dedication, and tradition is above and beyond what is expected of most religious people. As Opus Dei members believe that all of their working lives are part of their religious offering, it can be surprising to see the amount of prayer and conventional religious activity that is also required. But these are not the only practices done by Opus Dei members. As well as the above, there are also those who carry out more specific acts.

“Aspirations” is the name given to the short prayers that are said at regular intervals throughout the day. These might be something like “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, I give you my heart and soul,” or “Jesus, I love you with all of my heart.” Many of the wordings are handed down from the prelate of Opus Dei, including a recent one that said “Everything with Peter to Jesus through Mary.” Similarly, some members use holy water in order to purify themselves before going to bed for the night. This can be combined with a number of Hail Mary’s. Furthermore, the corporal mortification that we have already alluded to is just another example of the kind of Opus Dei religious dedication that really sets them apart from other organizations.

In addition to the everyday activities that the church encourages, Opus Dei organize regular events designed to help with members’ religiosity. This includes the “circle,” a class delivered by a layperson that focuses on some theological element of Opus Dei, as well as containing a section that helps members examine their conscience. This works in tandem with monthly recollection meetings, which are made up of a few meditation sessions and delivered by a priest. Once a year, supernumeraries attend Opus Dei workshops. These can last several days, while numeraries typically have an annual course that they can attend. Furthermore, there are often Opus Dei retreats that can provide several days’ worth of religious education and affirmation crammed into a short period. Sometimes, these retreats can be conducted almost entirely in silence, encouraging deeper stages of meditation. While these events are happening, members will continue to receive spiritual guidance from associates and numeraries.

In order to learn about these practices, members will often receive a document titled Catechism of Opus Dei. Now up to at least its seventh edition, the document is roughly 130 pages long and is not distributed to the general public. It is designed for internal use only, often being used to guide prayer, meditation, and reflection meetings. It's organized in a question-and-answer format, designed to provide solutions to the issues faced by members. The document has been published for many years and not without controversy. Escriva himself had to write a short note in a previous edition explaining why it was being withdrawn from circulation, citing the "intense and hidden opposition to the Work" as the reason. The passage does not go into depth on the exact nature of this opposition, but it was enough for the church leaders to believe that the Catechism of Opus Dei might be dangerous if it fell into the wrong hands. The modern edition of the document contains a history of Opus Dei and a number of deliberations on theological matters. If there was indeed controversial information being distributed to members, it has since been removed.

For the numeraries of Opus Dei, life inside the center is even more regimented. For example, they are required to attend a daily meeting known as the "tertulia," which has been likened to a family get together for those who live in the building. Here, they will receive an education akin to the seminary studies that a trainee priest might receive. The yearly retreats for numeraries are often longer, sometimes taking as long as three weeks, such is the intensity of the course. Added to their religious devotions, numeraries are expected to make themselves available for Opus Dei-related activities. This might be helping out in a youth center or organizing church-related events. It might be helping to tackle unforeseen problems around the center or helping with visitors and newer members. These kinds of tasks are considered family activities and, again, are carried out with the same degree of sanctimony and religious forethought.

At the same time as these smaller rituals, practices, and traditions are being exercised, it is expected that all members of Opus Dei will have some kind of employment. This is not a unilateral requirement, in that the type of employment can vary on a case by case basis. When asking what it is that

Opus Dei does, work is an essential part of their belief system. That means that the job might be a banker or a homemaker, but each role is approached with a spiritual element. But in addition to this, there is the work that members are expected to carry out on behalf of the church. This could involve helping at the Opus Dei center or even serving at the national or international headquarters. Whatever it is that they are doing, there is an expectation from Opus Dei that all members will strive to work as hard as possible and to achieve the highest standards available in every capacity of their working lives.

Though these expectations might appear taxing to those who do not involve religion in their lives to any great extent, Opus Dei members are often left with some time free to themselves. At this point, they are essentially allowed to do what they please. At least, in an official capacity, Opus Dei members are allowed to spend their free time in any way they please, so long as they apply the same devotional religious ideas to anything they might try to accomplish. In fact, the Opus Dei doctrine is applied in almost every area of life. Members are asked to consider the religious ramifications of their careers, their friendships, their political decisions, their hobbies, even the choices they make as a consumer. All activity should be carried out with the Opus Dei doctrine in mind. While the church might not tell people exactly what to do – who to vote for or what brands to buy, for example – they will ask members to think about spiritual matters in every facet of their lives. In that respect, everything an Opus Dei member does is somehow colored by their religion.

Part of the devotional practice of Opus Dei's doctrine includes work done for the church. These projects can include youth centers, schools, agricultural endeavors, and many other types of work. Often, taking part in one of these projects will be accompanied by a doctrinal message on how this work relates to the church and to God. In all, Opus Dei members have worked on a huge number of projects around the world. These have included:

- The running of 15 universities for the benefit of 80,000 students. Perhaps the most famous is the University of Navarra, located in

Pamplona, Spain, which allows students to study law, philosophy, medicine, theology, economics, communications, and many other subjects. In addition, campuses in Rome and Guatemala show that these educational facilities are a global concern.

- There are seven Opus Dei hospitals, institutions that employ over a thousand doctors and fifteen hundred nurses. At any one time, they could be treating as many as 300,000 patients. Locations include Congo and Nigeria, providing health care in less-equipped regions.
- Opus Dei runs eleven business schools with as many as ten thousand students in locations such as Mexico, Barcelona, and Buenos Aires.
- There are more than 35 primary and secondary schools run by Opus Dei around the world, five of which are in the USA. Others are in places such as Kenya and Japan.
- Opus Dei has nearly 100 technical schools teaching vocational skills, often located purposefully in poorer neighborhoods. These can teach English and Spanish as second languages to children, teenagers, and adults in countries such as Italy, Brazil, the Philippines, Peru, and Guatemala.
- Opus Dei provides residences to 6,000 students in at least 165 locations around the world, the majority of whom are not members of the organization. These living quarters will often include libraries, study areas, and academic assistance, as well as offering spiritual and religious guidance. These are located in Holland, Spain, Taiwan, and London.

As well as these Opus Dei-related institutions, there are others that are not run by the organization, but rather are affiliated with them. That means that two universities, a business school, 213 primary and secondary schools, 59 vocational colleges, an untold number of medical clinics, and 27 pharmacies have all received assistance in some form or another from Opus Dei in recent years. The group is happy to discuss their involvement in such matters, especially considering that many of these projects provide good PR for a much-maligned organization. In addition, they provide many Opus Dei members with potential volunteer work if and when they have the time to spare. In addition to those projects listed above, it is not uncommon for members to devise and implement their own ideas for charitable efforts in

the community. These might be subject to Opus Dei's approval and might receive backing from the group, though are rarely mentioned in official documentation. Despite this, many of these projects will somehow adhere to the organization's theological principles.

The difference between the official and unofficial works in regards to Opus Dei is significant. The former, commonly called "corporate works," are those that have an official relation to the organization. Trying to differentiate between these and the works that are simply carried out by members is something that has troubled outside observers for a long time. Both are staffed with Opus Dei members and carried out in the spirit of the organization, so why the difference? Some have suggested that tax liabilities in certain countries might be the reason, though Opus Dei denies this. Instead, the official reasoning is three fold. First, it might be that unofficial works are carried out by non-Catholics. Second, Opus Dei has said that it does not want to stifle members' creative instincts by providing too many suggestions. Finally, it is said that there might be the possibility that the secularity of Opus Dei's works would be compromised. Despite affiliation with the church, Opus Dei hopes that its agents and members will be viewed as individuals, rather than people working on the organization's behalf. Escriva himself once announced his disgust at those who attempted to use their Catholicism to attain special privileges, so Opus Dei attempts to make this a non-issue. In doing so, however, they muddy the waters between personal and official Opus Dei projects, something that can make trying to keep track of the organization's activities slightly more difficult.

However, everything we have seen thus far has very much been in the public view. It's not uncommon for large religious organizations to be involved in charitable ventures, nor is it uncommon that they would involve their members in such endeavors. But once you start looking closely at the inner workings of Opus Dei (especially in relation to the Vatican), then the picture begins to look very different. Firstly, we should examine what is known as the personal prelature.

Perhaps the first encounter with the controversial side of Opus Dei in the English-speaking world occurred in 1982. At the time, the media's attention

was not focused in any way on the organization. Some people might have known them as a particularly devout denomination within the Catholic Church, but there was little attention paid to either Opus Dei or their activities. This changed when Opus Dei was granted canonical status by Pope John Paul II providing the organization with a "personal prelature," which is kind of like a personal, unique diocese defined by contract rather than geography. The "prelate" refers to the man – usually a bishop – who is chosen to run the prelature. It's a strange part of the Catholic legislature but one with important ramifications.

What it meant was that Opus Dei members were distinct within the Catholic Church. On the normal matters of Catholicism, they would defer to their local Catholic priest, whether they were in Nairobi, Rome, or Tokyo. So for example, processes such as obtaining a marriage annulment would proceed through the normal channels of Catholicism. But it amounted to a formal recognition of Opus Dei's rules and doctrines. Furthermore, it was a kind of permission from the Catholic Church for Opus Dei members to be subject to the prelature and its rules in parts of their lives that were not normally governed by the Church. In other words, it put an official stamp on the pervasive and somewhat controlling grip in which Opus Dei holds its members. But that's not the only reason the prelature was controversial. To this date, the personal prelature granted to Opus Dei remains unique. No other organization in the world enjoys such a privilege.

The history of the personal prelature can be traced back to the Second Vatican Council, which took place in 1965. This was a massive examination and modernization of exactly how the Catholic Church was organized, and the establishment of the personal prelature was made possible during this time. By 1983, the Vatican had published a new Code of Canon Law, a set of rules for Catholicism that included Opus Dei as the one and only personal prelature in the world. The move sent shock waves through the religious community and was soon picked up by the wide world. People began to open their eyes to Opus Dei and began to question just why this small branch of the Church was being given such privileged positions.

For most people, the reason for Opus Dei's favored status seemed to be linked to their founder. Escriva had been trained as a lawyer, though his graduating thesis at the seminary had concerned an "extraordinary case of quasi-episcopal jurisdiction" as it pertained to a medieval Spanish convent. As such, Escriva was one of the world's leading scholars on the finer details of the Catholic Church's canon and judiciary. More than anyone, he knew the rules and regulations right down to the fine print. It should be no surprise that the history of Escriva's Opus Dei's organization can fill over 650 pages of legal history in the church, broadly documented in *The Canonical Path of Opus Dei: The History and Defense of a Charism*.

It was in 1941 that Escriva's organization was first approved and gained the status of a pious union. This was followed by a merger with another group, the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, two years later. By 1947, the organization had become a secular institute, free from the official oversight of the Catholic Church. This placed Opus Dei in the perfect position for the 1982 declaration as a personal prelature. Most men would not have known how to navigate the choppy waters of the Catholic bureaucracy, but Escriva was a master.

Opus Dei members themselves, however, are keen to argue that their growth was not a quest for special privileges. Instead, they suggest that they sought to find a canonical means of protecting the original vision of their founder. To give an example of how Escriva managed to turn the Catholic codes to his advantage, take a look at the Code of Canon Law from 1917. Canon 500 of this document declares that a secular institute is not permitted to be composed of people of both genders. As such, the laws suggest that Opus Dei should have been split into two distinct bodies, one for men and one for women. By the time the personal prelature came into effect in 1983, however, this requirement was removed. Opus Dei is the only personal prelature and thus the only organization within the Catholic Church that does not have to observe this rule (or many others.)

It's this awarding of the canonical status that is difficult to underplay in the history of Opus Dei. To the outsider, it might look like boring and insipid disagreements over rules and regulations. But the Catholic Church is nearly

two millennia old and these laws have been observed for centuries. It is these same laws that dictate the way in which religion is implemented to the millions of Catholics around the world. That they should allow Opus Dei to be exempt on one hand and so close to the Vatican on the other seems to indicate that the organization – despite Opus Dei's protestations – has managed to wrangle a special set of privileges for itself.

Thanks to this privileged position, Opus Dei can occupy a unique place within the Catholic Church. They are able to insist on their own singularity, they are able to maintain a standoffish attitude with regards to other religious and secular organizations, they are able to remain fussy and demanding about the vocabulary and categories of the Church's canon, and their constant quest for approval from the highest authorities within the Vatican ae much better explained. Once you realize that Opus Dei's special position within the Church grants them singular privileges, there emerges an image of an organization that is not as confident as they might otherwise appear. Opus Dei, as a personal prelature, walks a fine line and are seemingly always worried about slipping to either side. They might fall to the way of a religious order, which would distance them from the vast majority of lay people who would see them as just another church. Or they might fall too far the other way and be seen as a secular organization, which would provide no room for priests or theology. Instead, Opus Dei's concept of the priests and the lay people as being constituent parts of a greater whole is a finely balanced proposition. Importantly, it is not a part of the Catholic tradition. Rarely in the history of the Catholic Church had the ideas of Opus Dei been spoken about or adhered to. The personal prelature, then, acts as a form of protection for this finely balanced proposition. It provides Opus Dei with the traditional authority of the Catholic Church. Rather than being a bureaucratic move for power, Escriva's manipulation of the canonical regulations provided protection for a fledgling religious order. When viewed like this, Opus Dei looks much less threatening.

In the above section, a reference was made to the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross. It can help to understand this organization better, especially in terms of how it relates to Opus Dei. In simple terms, the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross is an organization that unites both the Opus Dei priests with

priests from other dioceses. This association allows them to share and discuss doctrine and spirituality, especially with regards to the Opus Dei idea of formation. It's something that is written into the laws of the Catholic Church. Specifically, Canon 278 of the Code of Canon Law provides diocesan priests with the right to join up with any spiritual association they might choose. It's a form of independence for the many priests of the Catholic Church.

The matter was a personal concern for Escriva. So worried was he about the formation of the Church's priests that he came very close to actually leaving Opus Dei \ in order to found a new organization that would permit the uniting of priests as they saw fit. In the end, Escriva decided that he would be able to accomplish this goal within Opus Dei and created a society that united priests, whether they were in Opus Dei or not. Within this society, only the priests formally acknowledged as being a part of Opus Dei are bound by the prelate's jurisdiction, technically referred to as the "incardination." This means that these priests come under the direct authority of Opus Dei. Those priests who are incardinated into Opus Dei's prelature will then be considered numeraries, while those who are incardinated in their own dioceses still will be counted as either associates or supernumeraries. The distinction is typically made with regards to how much time is available to dedicate to the Opus Dei activities, but all are considered to be involved with the Opus Dei community.

It's a vision established by Escriva, who deemed that diocesan priests (that is, those who are not Opus Dei priests) would be able to sanctify their work, but in order to do so, they might develop a strong relationship with the bishop. For diocesan priests, their means of sanctifying work is to follow the word of those further up the Catholic chain of command. That's where the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross comes in. It is not designed to replace the bishop in this situation. The society does not intend to become the primary point of reference for priests. Indeed, it's even possible for bishops themselves to be members of the society. Instead, the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross hopes to promote holiness within its many members through the fulfilment of their duties as priests. Just as a carpenter might turn his work into a religious expression were he an Opus Dei member, the Society allows

for priests to do the same, using their position within the Church in a different manner to the standard Opus Dei priests. While still fulfilling their duties as Catholic priests, the Society offers the men a chance to learn Opus Dei's teachings at the same time.

The society was a creation of Escriva in 1943. Partly, it was designed to ensure that priests were never in short supply for Opus Dei members. At the time, Opus Dei was not the global organization it is today, so by using Catholic by-laws and regulations to skirt around a few of the doctrinal issues, Escriva was able to swell the ranks of his priesthood. Indeed, the first ordinations within Opus Dei only occurred in 1944 – the three non-smoking priests we mentioned earlier – and the same men became the first members of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross. Today, there are not only just under 2,000 Opus Dei priests, but there are almost double that number who are members of the Priestly Society.

It is a standing tradition within Opus Dei that the priests are ordained from within. That means that the associates and numeraries who are already so dedicated to the organization will likely become its next generation of clergymen. This not only creates a particularly devout model of priest, but it also means that the Vatican is not able to accuse Opus Dei of stealing their priests. On becoming an Opus Dei priest, one is immediately entered into the Priestly Society. At the same time, the prelate of Opus Dei is the Society's president general. It's a regulatory quirk, however, that there is no rank within the Society. Instead, diocesan priests are still considered subject to their diocesan bishop. They are simply part of a Society built on equal footing. Once again, Escriva was very careful in the way he organized and constructed his organizations, walking the tightrope of permissiveness above the vast history, tradition, and authority of the Catholic Church.

With all of these complicated doctrinal arrangements, many people are left asking one important question: who exactly runs Opus Dei? Well, just like its relationship to the wider Catholic Church, trying to answer this question can be difficult. As might be expected from the organization that Escriva set up, the statues and canons of Opus Dei are difficult to pick apart. However, they are used to determine the internal governance of Opus Dei.

The ultimate authority within Opus Dei, unsurprisingly enough, is the prelate. This position is the natural successor to Escriva, and thus far there have only been two people who have held the post. Following the death of Escriva himself in 1975, Alvaro del Portillo was chosen as his successor. Portillo was later made a bishop by Pope John Paul II, in 1991, though he was not a bishop when he took on the prelate position. Portillo died in 1994, meaning that a vote was held and Javier Echevarria was elected to take on the position of prelate, being made a bishop the following year. Of all the positions within Opus Dei, prelate is the only one that holds a life term. The men who have held the position have also had close ties. Portillo was considered the closest collaborator of Escriva, while Echevarria was Escriva's personal secretary for many years.

Moving down the chain of command, things become more complicated. Traditionally, the Catholic Church has a clearly defined structure, with the Pope on top (in earthly terms) and then a clear organization all the way down to the local parish level. In Opus Dei, however, this is complicated by the organization's doctrine. The priests, for example, will view the prelate as their bishop. The relationship between the two positions is akin to that between a conventional Catholic diocesan priest and their respective bishop. Within the structure of Opus Dei, this is clear and simple. As soon as a priest wishes to work outside those confines, however, he finds that he must possess faculties from the respective diocesan bishop. In simple terms, Opus Dei's priests all answer to the prelate on matters related to Opus Dei. As soon as their work extends outside the organization, however, they enter into the traditional command structure of the Catholic Church, which can get quite complicated.

The prelate does not work alone, however. He is assisted by two central councils, both headquartered in Rome. The first is the General Council, the main group for the men's branch of Opus Dei, and the second is the Central Advisory Council, which deals with the women's branch of Opus Dei. Both feed advice to the prelate in order to help him make decisions. In theory, both councils are equal but are kept separate, with an almost taboo-level

restriction on them holding communications with one another. As such, discussions between the two councils are handled in writing.

Since the days of Escriva, the women's council has held just as much weight as the men's when discussions are held. The prelate entertains the views and opinions of both councils and has traditionally not decimated against one side. The councils themselves are put together in similar fashion, being made up of Opus Dei members who have a history of numerous projects with youth groups, supernumeraries, and numeraries. These members rotate more often than the prelate position, so it is not uncommon for the most respected, longest-standing Opus Dei members to be invited to the position at one point or another and serve terms of eight years.

In addition to this, two important positions are the vicar-general and the secretary-general. By statute, these positions are filled with priests and are

common to both branches. Between the two councils, decisions on regional delegates are put to a vote, whereby localized administrators are appointed. In Opus Dei terms, “region” is often synonymous with country, in that France and India would both be considered regions. Looking down to a regional level, the structure remains largely the same. That is to say, there is a regional vicar who is considered the authority, and he is assisted by a pair of councils, one for women and one for men. If the region is particularly large, such as the United States of America, then there are further subdivisions, named delegations, which also have the same basic structure of a vicar and two councils.

On a more general level, the regions are often split into distinct centers, of which there are over 1,750 in the world. The centers are typically the localized projection of Opus Dei. They have a director – who is not a priest – and he is assisted by a local council. The minimum requirement for a center is a director and two other members of Opus Dei. With the centers typically segregated by gender, then there is little need for male- or female-specific councils.

It can help to think of the center as the fundamental representation of Opus Dei. These buildings are the rock on which the entire organization is built, though it is not necessarily a physical place. Though many centers have lavish buildings in London or Manhattan, others have been arranged around a single residence or a workplace. The idea is that the center will assist with the organization of the means of formation. It will also provide a level of pastoral care to local members. The centers are only ever opened once Opus Dei has the permission of the bishop in the local diocese who has the right to visit the center under canon law. Once there, the diocesan bishop may carry out the traditional inspections of the tabernacle or the oratory or even the place where confession is held. Though this is permissible under Vatican rulings, it is rarely pursued. For the most part, centers are allowed to operate as they see fit.

On a grander organization level, every eight years sees the hosting of the Opus Dei General Congress. These meetings are attended by representatives from regions around the world, anywhere that Opus Dei is

present. The Congresses are used for examining the work of the prelature and discussing potential directions and ideas for the future of Opus Dei. It is possible for members from around the world to present their ideas to the highest ranking member of Opus Dei, ideas which will then be discussed. Should there be a need to choose a new prelate – in the case of death, usually – then the General Congress is where the vote is held. In the past, the death of the prelate has meant the immediate calling of a General Congress in order to quickly resolve the leadership issue. The vote falls to the priests who meet the right criteria – age, length of membership, experience – and the vote is then passed along to the Pope himself for confirmation. As such, this means that the position of prelate is conferred by the Pope himself, a high honor indeed for a relatively small part of the Catholic Church. Though women are not permitted to vote, it is the female delegates who are responsible for choosing the candidates for the men to vote upon. Once again, this seems to be in line with Escriva's idea that the two sexes should be equal but should remain separate.

The organization and power structures of Opus Dei not only reveal the internal spiritual ideas that the group holds, but also looking at the history of such structures can teach us about what makes Opus Dei stand apart from many other groups. Despite their relatively small numbers, Opus Dei is treated with a huge amount of privilege within the Catholic Church. Members demand attention and seem to have carved out a niche for themselves, based chiefly on Escriva's manipulation of Catholic canon. As we will see in later chapters, this understanding forms the basis of the controversy inherent in Opus Dei. It is only through understanding the basics that we are able to learn just how strange and different Opus Dei can be. In the coming chapters, we will look closer at the more concerning, controversial, and hidden aspects of the organization.

Controversy Reigns

For the vast majority of people, the words Opus Dei only become familiar through the numerous controversial aspects of the organization. Now that we have an understanding of how the church is structured and how they approach the world, we can begin to look at how these fundamental principles will cause so much consternation among the public. From claims of extreme secrecy, to corporal mortification, to an influence in the political world, we will now examine the controversial aspects of Opus Dei and discover whether there is any truth to the rumors. In many cases, the issues surrounding Opus Dei date back to the 1940s and have been addressed by the organization on numerous occasions. However, the controversy endures.

Cloaked in Secrecy

The first issue we will address is the idea of secrecy. Opus Dei and secrets have been linked for years, with the majority of headlines involving the organization typically following the same template or pattern. There seems to be a desire on behalf of the public to learn more about Opus Dei purely because they are seen as keeping secrets from the public. There have been various claims that Opus Dei is a secret society or that its work takes place behind closed doors. But is this true?

As we are working in the confines of the English language, let's have a look back in time for the first mention of Opus Dei in the English-speaking media. An article appeared in the March edition of Time magazine in 1957, noting that three members of Opus Dei had become members in General Franco's fascist government in Spain. In the piece, Opus Dei members are referred to as "the White Masons," a hint towards their reputation for secrecy. Ironically enough, such was the nature of Franco's government that the fiercely traditional Opus Dei is mentioned in the article as having "liberal leanings," at least in comparison to the fascist regime.

The White Masons is a concept that had held true. Even is the name itself hasn't remained as popular, the idea behind it remains. The Freemasons are one of the most notorious secret societies in the world, with conspiracy theories detailing their responsibility and involvement in all manner of political machinations. It's a feeling that has been applied to Opus Dei, not only by the public at large, but also from within the Catholic Church itself. Many of these accusations can be traced by to Spain in the 1930s and 1940s when Opus Dei was competing with a number of other church organizations.

The Masonic links go as far back as the late 1930s. At the time, a number of Opus Dei members noted a drop-off in interest among young people. When they asked around, they discovered that a rumor had been circulating stating that the Opus Dei centers were emblazoned with Masonic and Kabbalistic imagery, that the communion hosts had a strange smell, that praying members conducted strange rituals including crucifixions of members in a blood-ridden style, and that Escriva himself would levitate before his congregation, hypnotizing his audience. Around this time, one of Spain's leading Jesuits accused Opus Dei of being "a secretive heretical society of a Masonic stamp."

These rumors spread through Spain like wildfire. By 1941, the fascists had set up special courts to repress the Masons and other secret societies, a move that led to Opus Dei being investigated, accused of being a "Masonic branch connected to Jewish sects." Eventually, it was archived with no effect, but that didn't stop the rumors. In 1942, a confidential report was published that described Opus Dei's secretive nature as being against the aims of the Spanish government. People wanted to know what was happening behind the closed doors of the relatively new group. Barcelona's civil governor investigated one member, demanding answers, claiming that Opus Dei was akin to a "sect of illuminati." In Valencia, they even sent a girl to be tutored by Escriva in order to uncover information, such as whether there existed secret tunnels beneath the Opus Dei center and whether it hid Masonic symbols. In certain cities, book burnings were held. Copies of *The Way*, written by Escriva, were thrown on the fires.

It didn't take long for the rumors to reach the Vatican. A report was prepared and handed to the Pope that described the "traces of a secret tendency to dominate the world with a sort of Christian Masonry." It should be noted that similar accusations were levelled at the Jesuits, as well as the Knights Templar, in the past. But the Vatican did nothing. Despite the furor over the secretive approach of Opus Dei, no charges or allegations were ever formally levelled. Instead, rumors and stories circulated about what happened inside the Opus Dei centers.

Over the years, these accusations have resurfaced. The Vatican wrote to Escriva in 1971 and requested a list of all Opus Dei members, as they were concerned about rumors that the organization was "infiltrating" the Vatican. Escriva complied. Such accusations bounced back and forth between Catholic and secular spheres, with both sides concerned about Opus Dei's secrecy. In 1986, the Italian parliament mentioned Opus Dei in an investigation into the influence of secret societies. It was eight months before the organization was cleared by Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, himself a staunch Catholic man. In defense of Opus Dei's supposed secrecy, Scalfaro pointed out that the organization's Italian headquarters were stationed in Milan, and he gave the address and telephone number for their information desk. This, he suggested, was not expected from a secret society.

This contrasted with the findings of a Swiss court a few years later, when an Opus Dei-related educational group found themselves in a dispute with a newspaper. The court found that Opus Dei was indeed a "covertly" operating "secret organization." In 1996, a parliamentary commission in France included Opus Dei on a list of 172 sects (or dangerous religious movements) that operated in France. Though a number of French and Italian bishops protested, the Vatican made no official comment. Two months later, however, Pope John Paul II named a church in Rome after Escriva. However, these claims of secrecy are not confined to the past. Still today, people view membership in Opus Dei as being akin to being a member of a secret society.

Perhaps the reason why the secrecy issue has become so central to criticism of Opus Dei is because of the inability to discern membership with any

great accuracy. Across the world, and in Spain especially, there are many Opus Dei members who work in conventional offices, progressing along traditional career paths. Occasionally, you could be shocked to discover that your normal, competent coworker is actually an Opus Dei member and you never had any idea. This person might not go home every night to a family, as you do, but he instead travels home to the local center, prays in silence, unclasps the cilice belt that has been cutting into his leg for hours, and then commences his weekly ritual of whipping himself while praying. To many people, the idea that their co-workers could be involved in so alien a lifestyle is shocking. To some, it is unwelcome.

On a surface level, there seems to be little way to tell if a person is an Opus Dei member. Being involved in the organization is no great secret, and many members will be happy to share. Others, however, have become aware of the rumors and reputation and wish to keep their membership a secret. Unlike many other Christian denominations, Opus Dei members do not pride themselves on lapel pins and bumper stickers. Such an issue has led to the spreading of many rumors.

In Spain, particularly, there is a list of ways in which you can supposedly spot an Opus Dei member. One such theory is that members favor Atkinson's cologne, said to be Escriva's personal choice. Similarly, there is a rumor that Opus Dei businessmen can be identified by a missing button on the sleeve of their suit jacket. Another is that members smoke Ducados cigarettes, perhaps a reference to the tale of the three priests and an effort to fit in. Speaking to actual members, however, these ideas are quickly put to bed.

There are some theories that are a little less out there. Some say you can spot Opus Dei members because they will own a small statue of a donkey. It's certainly not obligatory, but many Opus Dei centers do have donkey statues, a common symbol throughout the organization, with Escriva having compared himself to the donkey that carried Christ into Jerusalem. In a similar vein, "Pax" is a common greeting between Opus Dei members, to which the correct reply is "in aeternum." This is not a foolproof method of identification, however, as those who use it will need to know that the other

is certainly in the organization and will often simply avoid doing so around people who are not Opus Dei members.

Indeed, most Opus Dei members adhere to what is known as “discretion.” People do not advertise their Opus Dei membership in too brazen a fashion, partly due to a desire to retain the secular nature of the organization. Members are not meant to be like those in other religious orders; they don’t want to appear religious. As well as this, Escriva warned against those who might try to use their Opus Dei membership to advance their careers, so many choose to not advertise the fact at all. Escriva also preached the idea of “collective humility,” meaning that Opus Dei as an organization should not seek out self-aggrandizement, something which was written directly into the constitution of the order and forbids the wearing of “distinctive insignia” and other such advertisements.

There’s even a canonical reason as to why Opus Dei might be more withdrawn about membership. During the period between 1947 and 1982, the organization was classified by the Vatican as a “secular institute.” This meant that it was to be treated as being outside of religious life. By 1950, changes in the regulations meant that members were technically in violation of the Church’s laws. So as not to draw attention to the fact, many of the upper echelons of Opus Dei decided that discretion might be the best option. In the modern day, Opus Dei’s reputation might be reason enough for people to keep quiet.

It’s also worth noting that Opus Dei members are not alone in their discretion. There are many organizations within the Catholic Church that do not openly broadcast their membership. Among these are the Missionaries of the Kingship of Christ, the Community of Stain John, the Crusaders of Saint Mary, and the Father Kolbe Missionaries of Immaculata. Few of these groups have anything like the notoriety of Opus Dei, but their practices could be described as similarly secretive.

But the secrecy does not just apply to membership. Over the last few decades, the “secret statutes” have garnered a great deal of attention. These statutes are the Vatican laws that have been approved by the Pope and that

govern Opus Dei as an organization. As a rule, access to these documents is forbidden to the majority of people. A quick Google search will seemingly confirm this, with many websites clamoring to discuss the hidden statutes and what could possibly be contained within.

This is not entirely true, however. In 1982, a book titled *The Canonical Path of Opus Dei* was published by the organization and contained a copy – in full – of the statutes. There is a problem for most people, though, in that the documents were published in their original form. That is to say, they were written in Latin. Opus Dei has never officially offered a translation of the statutes, so all inquiries to see such documents are directed to a set of regulations that most people cannot read. Even then, translations can be difficult. An unauthorized, unofficial translation may interpret laws slightly differently than Opus Dei's original. Many people have seen this as Opus Dei's dodging of the requests to see their governing laws. According to the organization, the fact that the statutes are Vatican-created documents means that it falls on the Vatican to offer a translation. Again, people have seen this as dodging the issue.

In addition to the "secret statutes," there are other internal documents that are definitely kept hidden. There are many internal publications, magazines, and leaflets that are designed for internal reading only. Many of these, Opus Dei argues, need to be kept within the organization due to the fact that they might be misinterpreted without the correct context. While come critics have suggested that these internal publications – such as *Cronica* and *Noticias* – are used to propagandize and rewrite the history of the organization, Opus Dei themselves suggest that these pieces are simply private collections of members' memories and thoughts, not intended for public consumption. Indeed, it is not impossible to obtain a copy of these texts and many have made their way out of the various Opus Dei centers around the world.

Regardless of how much information is allowed to leak out of the Opus Dei centers around the world, people will remain curious about certain elements of the organization. Often, Opus Dei's notoriety feeds into this. People become curious about the organization and hope to find out more, only to

discover a blocked path in their way. This naturally makes them even more curious, to the point of being accusatory. As we shall see in the following sections, however, withholding information might be the least secret, least strange aspect of Opus Dei.

Pain Threshold

If you ask most people what they know about Opus Dei, chances are they will give you an answer focused on mortification. Thanks to the huge popularity of Dan Brown's book, the Da Vinci Code, and the subsequent film, many people in the English speaking world first heard of the organization through a fictional character. One of the most shocking traits of the Opus Dei monk in the book – at least, for the uninitiated – is the way in which he inflicts pain upon himself as an act of prayer. Though Dan Brown's book has been criticized in many circles (for many reasons), this much is true: mortification has long been one of the strangest parts of Opus Dei and is certainly one of the most notorious.

Mortification, as it is understood here, involves inflicting physical harm upon oneself in order to "tame the flesh" and bring the human experience closer to that of Jesus Christ. But before we continue with this section, we should clear up one important fact. Mortification is only practiced by a small percentage of the Opus Dei membership, and even in this case, it is often far tamer than depicted in many works of fiction. However, that does not stop many of the more incendiary details from being repeated in the main stream media. But what is the truth?

Bold claims about Opus Dei can be traced all the way back to its roots. As early as the 1930s and 1940s, Escriva and his new group were accused of many crimes, including heresy, Masonry, Kabbalah, ritualism, and even having secret tunnels under their centers. But at the time, few people saw fit to criticize the practice of mortification. At the time, it was a recognized part of many spiritualist beliefs.

Just like the tools of Opus Dei's mortification, other Church groups had similar devices. The hair shirt is the name given to one such device, a rough cloth garment inlaid with barbed chains and worn beneath the regular clothes. The hair shirt was demonstrative of many Catholic practices from before the 20th Century, the point being to inflict discomfort. Pope Paul VI was known to use a hair shirt, for example, right up until the day of his death. For monks during the 1930s and the 1940s, the time when Opus Dei came into being, such a practice was commonplace for monks. In addition, the whip known as the flagellum was another common tool, with Church scholars as far back as the 10th Century praising its pain-inflicting abilities.

For some Opus Dei members, tools such as the cilice (the strap wrapped around the thigh) are much like the rosary. Neither were invented by members of Opus Dei. But such comments do little to address the fact that mortification devices are not only out of favor, but are seen by the rest of society as being destructive and harmful. Thus, it's little surprise that such antiquated and poorly thought of practices should attract attention to Opus Dei. To those who are critical of Opus Dei, such behavior is an example of the organization's inhumane approach to religion. Though for those who admire the group, it should be noted that Opus Dei's refusal to bow to modern tastes is commendable.

Trying to understand mortification as it pertains to the individual members can be tough. Though all members of Opus Dei technically take part, only around 30% are involved in the more headline-grabbing kinds of self-inflicted violence. For the supernumeraries, mostly laymen and female members, whipping oneself or wearing a cilice is hardly ever done. Instead, they're too busy with families and children, using their working lives to sanctify their relationship with God. Often, they can have an entirely different form of mortification. This might amount to chores, such as doing the washing up when it isn't your turn or doing a small favor for someone.

In terms of the remaining 30% of Opus Dei members, however, there is little question that the mortification practices are violent in nature and intended to cause pain. Let's take a closer look at some of the most common:

The **Cilice**, mentioned already, is a spiked chain. Members wear it bound around the upper thigh for around two hours every day (excluding Sundays, feast days, and other notable days). It is sharp enough to leave visible pin pricks in the flesh once removed, which can add up to noticeable scarring over time. Due to the nature of the device, most numeraries prefer to wear it in the privacy of the Opus Dei center. When wearing it in day-to-day life, it can be a visible sign, something that would contravene the idea of discretion. There are reports of members who do wear the cilice during everyday life, with these individuals often claiming that it can remind the wearer of its presence during difficult times, providing extra concentration, focus, and an affirmation of one's relationship with God.

The **Discipline**, also mentioned elsewhere in this book, is the famous whip used by Opus Dei members. There is often a lot of confusion as to the size and nature of the device, but it is not the heavy, thick strip of leather that most people expect. Instead, it's more like a thin cord, often made using macramé-weaving methods. Typically, it will be held in one hand and used during prayer time. For the duration of a prayer such as a Hail Mary or an Our Father, the Opus Dei member will whip themselves across either the back or the buttocks at regular intervals. If a member so desires, they can speak to their priest and ask permission to use the discipline more regularly.

Sleeping arrangements can often be a part of the mortification practices. For female numeraries, this can involve uncomfortable sleeping arrangements, placing a thin but hard board over the top of a normal mattress and forgoing the use of pillows at least one night a week. For their male equivalents, this can be a case of sleeping on a floor for one night a week or similarly going without a pillow. Though much less attention-grabbing than other mortification efforts, these practices are widely used throughout Opus Dei and can provide high levels of discomfort.

In terms of eating, it's possible to practice corporal mortification even during meal times. This could be something small such as forgoing the use of sugar or milk in one's coffee, choosing not to have dessert or a second course, and other variations on this theme. There are also designated fast days, on which Opus Dei members will refrain from eating within certain parameters. Theoretically, such practices should apply to all Catholics, though few are as strict as Opus Dei members when it comes to observing the traditions.

Silence is also a means of practicing corporal mortification. Every night, many Opus Dei members will enter into a personal examination of their own conscience. During this time, numeraries are often encouraged to stay in complete silence right through until the following morning's mass has been completed. This self-imposed silence is just another way in which members deny themselves privileges and remind themselves of their relationship with God.

There are also many other practices that have come in and out of fashion among Opus Dei members. In the 1980s, for example, many numeraries were encouraged to partake in cold showers. This was eventually phased out, though rumors have remained that Opus Dei centers do not have hot running water. This is untrue, but it is an example of how the ideas of mortification can feed into the social comprehension of Opus Dei.

So what of Escriva? Did the Opus Dei founder approve of the practice of mortification? There are a number of references to these kinds of practices in Escriva's writing. At one point in *The Way*, he recalls the ways in which saints such as Francis of Assisi, Benedict, and Bernard all exposed themselves to uncomfortable situations. Elsewhere, he describes the human body as the "enemy" and asks the reader why they treat this enemy "so softly." It's an idea Escriva returns to later, writing in *The Forge* that "what has been through the flesh, the flesh should pay back."

As well as his writings, there are examples from Escriva's own life that point toward him approving of such practices. Stories have been told by biographers of the man's private praying sessions, which would often describe in the detail the thick sound of the blows against his skin. By the end, the witness remembers, the floor was "covered with blood." But whether Escriva recommended these practices to his followers is much debated. It seems, at least, that Escriva was leading the way in terms of mortification, even if he did not see it as an essential part of Opus Dei.

It's a point of practice in Opus Dei to suggest that Escriva is not a figure to be emulated. Now officially a saint in the Catholic Church, there's little

need for every single member to believe that they could possibly emulate Escriva's own piousness. There are writings from Escriva that explicitly state that those practicing mortification should never do so if it directly endangers their lives or "embitters [their] characters." Indeed, unlike Escriva's own floor-bloodying efforts, he explicitly states that the cornerstone of penitence is love.

So if mortification is not essential to membership in Opus Dei, then why do so many people practice it still? If you listen to the criticism and conspiracies surrounding the organization, then it can be easy to overlook the supposed justification for carrying out such rituals. There is a spiritual goal behind mortification, one which members say is overlooked by the more fantastical, tabloid nature of much Opus Dei coverage in the media. Running a mile, they suggest, might bring about far more hardship and pain for people than the wearing of a cilice.

Mortification has been a part of Catholicism from long before the arrival of Opus Dei. Traditionally, it was part of the process of training people to live virtuously and devoutly. Known as asceticism, the practice has become a hallmark of the way Catholicism has been taught over the centuries. Gradually, the body is trained to endure hardships. These can come in many forms, and as we have already seen, they go in and out of fashion on a regular basis. It might help to view mortification as a form of spiritual exercise, gradually working oneself into better shape. It's not exclusively Catholic and could theoretically be practiced by a Muslim, a Sikh, or an atheist. It's even seen often in day-to-day life. For example, a parent withholding dessert from a poorly behaved child would fit the bill. What makes the practice particularly Christian, however, is the view that mortification is a response to sin.

When a sin has been committed, it's possible to use mortification in order to revive a sense of penitence. It's meant to kindle in the person a desire to rectify a situation, to make up for their sin. There's an idea that mortification is the person physically reminding themselves that sin causes wounds. These wounds are in the sinner, in the person they have sinned against, and in God. That's not to say that comforts and pleasant things are

inherently sinful, but rather than the acknowledgement that these things are good. Conversely then, denying them to oneself is all the greater because of this. It's a sign of regret, showing God that you're sorry that you've sinned, and that you're resolved not to do the same again.

There's a second, deeper, spiritual level. Through mortification, a person is able to unite themselves with the suffering of Jesus Christ. In particular, the suffering that Christ endured during the crucifixion is replicated (on a much smaller scale) in order to draw a person closer to their deity. There's a degree of atonement, sharing the burden of pain taht forms a large part of the theological message of the New Testament.

For celibates, this kind of mortification is seen as a chance for them to "give themselves" to God in as complete a manner as possible. For the majority of Catholics, this is a silent, internal process. The things to overcome are often abstract, such as hatred or pride. The difference with Opus Dei is that they are able to make these challenges physical, translating the same kind of theological issues present for most Catholics into something that is far more sensational when viewed without context.

But it's not only Opus Dei who practice mortification to this degree. Even some of the most famous Catholics of the last hundred years have been mortification advocates. Both Mother Teresa and Padre Pio were known to wear a cilice and used the discipline at one time or another. Both are now considered saints and neither were Opus Dei members. There is a community of nuns (the Discalced Carmelite Convent of Saint Teresa) in the Italian city of Livorno who construct mortification tools and sell them to the Catholic community at large. Again, they are not associated with Opus Dei in anything beyond the occasional business relationship.

So, in addition to Opus Dei, orders such as the Discalced Carmelites, the Franciscan Brothers, the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, the Mother of the Church Monastery, and many more groups practice forms of mortification. These organizations exist all across the world, though few garner as many headlines as Opus Dei. The practice – in its more severe and

more benign forms – is likely far more common in the Catholic Church than many people would care to imagine.

Despite this, the practice of mortification has inspired some of the most stinging criticisms of Opus Dei. One of these is former numeraries Sharon Clasen, who has left the organization and become of the best known writers on Opus Dei and its practices. To Clasen, Opus Dei is a cult. Her experiences in the organization have left a bitter, regretful, and painful taste in her mouth. One of her biggest criticisms is focused on the practice of mortification and how it affects people. The practices, she says, are indication of the "annihilation of the self" that Opus Dei is attempting to symbolically achieve.

Clasen can recall the time, shortly after she became a member, when she was handed a little blue pouch. Inside were her cilice and her discipline, ready for her to begin using. It was the first time she had seen either device. After three years of wearing the cilice and using the discipline, she had even been given classes and lessons on how to respond to people who might question her about them. These answers were along the familiar Opus Dei lines, suggesting that mortification was akin to heavy exercise. As well as this, rumors spread through the centers of how Escriva himself had practiced mortification, suggesting that he had fitted his discipline with broken glass and razor blades. According to Clasen, the idea behind spreading these rumors was to encourage a similar level of "devoutness" among numeraries.

She goes on to tell a story about how she attempted to follow in the potentially mythical footsteps of Escriva. While still at the center, Clasen found herself some safety pins. She opened them out, exposing the sharp points, and fitted them to the discipline she had been given. Using the modified whip, Clasen said her prayers. It was something she only attempted a few times, though it was far from unheard of among the Opus Dei community. Though she has since left the organization, the sight of a cilice can be enough to bring Sharon Clasen close to tears. She is not alone.

Another ex-member who has been critical of Opus Dei's ideas about mortification is John Roche. An Irishman who joined the organization in 1959, Roche spent fourteen years in the church, including time spent in an Opus Dei center in Kenya. While official Opus Dei information states that the more extreme versions of mortification is a rare occurrence and only limited, Roche confirms Clasen's version of events, suggesting that painful practices are used with regularity and often to extremes.

What is perhaps worse is the way in which those who do not practice mortification are treated by their fellow church members. Those who are deemed not sufficiently invested in the practice of physical mortification can sometimes be criticized openly. As stories circulate about how Escriva drove himself to extremes of mortification, those who don't show willingness to follow in his footsteps can feel as though they are being ostracized and targeted. Even if this is not official policy in the organization, the reports of its widespread nature are damning.

Another former member critical of Opus Dei is Agustina Lopez de los Mozos, who now runs a website that is designed to spread her views on the organization. Agustina was a numerary assistant for eight years, from her late teens until her mid-twenties. She was introduced to the cilice a short time after requesting admission. Though it was still a short time before she was given her own device, it's telling that the mortification practices are rarely revealed until after eager young recruits are firmly within the grips of the organization.

According to Agustina's story, the thinking regarding the cilice within Opus Dei is that the tighter it is tied, the greater one's "generosity" is held to be. It's almost competitive in the organization, with everyone eager to prove their devotion and relationship with God. Thus, more and more people tie the cilice tighter, wearing it for longer than the official recommendations might suggest. Even though the time limit is given as two hours a day, many people go beyond this. Many people wear a cilice every day, alternating legs to give their wounds a chance to heal.

Under the official prescription, the cilice should not break the skin. Agustina's experience, however, describes how extended periods of wearing the device would result in her removing bits of skin after every session, leaving behind wounds that would often take days to heal. Before they even had a chance to close, the wounds would be exposed to another cilice session only a short time later. When Agustina tried to wear the cilice around her waist – hoping that it would be less visible and less painful – she was admonished by the numerary who had given it to her.

When asked for comment about these punishing practices, Opus Dei officials have described the advice given to the above members as "errors." But there is little doubt that these kinds of practices do happen, and accordingly attract more and more attention to the church. With the sometimes shocking degrees of self-afflicted-violence that are evident among members, this attention is perhaps overwhelmingly negative. In the defense of Opus Dei, they did not invent, nor do they claim any exclusivity over violent mortification practices. However, there seems to be a very evident culture within the organization that proliferates and spreads practices that endanger the health of members. However, while these actions might get more of the attention in the press, there are greater structural problems that exist within Opus Dei. Aside from the headline-grabbing nature of mortification, it is the subject matters of the next sections that should cause greater consternation.

Women's Place

It's impossible to deny the fact that the Catholic Church has long has a troubled history of gender equality. A quick glance through the opening passages of the Bible is all one needs to confirm this, with the entire premise of original sin being predicated on the easily tempted nature of the world's first woman. Throughout the centuries, the Church's patriarchal stance has long been a reflection of a similar stance across all of Western civilization. Though there have undoubtedly been women within the Church who have done a great deal for female suffrage, it is only in recent

times that the Church has purposefully made a move towards being inclusive.

However, this book is not about the history of the Catholic Church. Just as Opus Dei often reflects the best and the worst aspects of traditional Catholic views, their treatment of women is one of the most criticized dimensions of the organization as a whole. Opus Dei's treatment and views regarding women are often one of the unmentioned issues. With mortification grabbing all of the headlines, this gender inequality can often be forced to take a backseat. But how big of an issue is it?

There has long been a sensation among those on the periphery of Opus Dei that the organization hides some hostility towards women. It's often an unspoken sensation, something that rumbles beneath the surface. For some, it is an extension of a centuries-old patriarchy, while for others it is a reflection of the group's fear of sexuality and the female gender. This, they say, has translated into a view of women that treats them as second class citizens, even if they are Opus Dei members.

Looking at the raw figures for Opus Dei, this might seem strange. At least 55%, a solid majority, of the members are female. For those sympathetic to Opus Dei, the argument is that the Church's two systems of governance – a branch for men and a branch for women – guarantees a systemic equality. The female members, they argue, receive the same theological, spiritual teaching, and formation as their male counterparts. Indeed, in certain regions, there are women who hold positions that would place them on a higher administrative rank than men. But still, there is the feeling that Opus Dei does not view both genders to be equal.

Like all matters pertaining to Opus Dei, it can help to think about what Escriva considered to be the correct path. On the whole, his discussions on the matter seem to be in favor of permitting women the exact same rights and privileges as men. For example, he faced criticism in some circles for his encouragement that women should study for theology degrees. While he seemed to come down heavily on the side of equal rights, however, Escriva's views were not entirely conclusive. In some respects, he admitted

to a belief that a "distinction" should be retained regarding the juridical capacity for receiving holy orders. He did admit, on another occasion, that without women, Opus Dei's work would collapse. But despite what their founder proclaimed and despite seeming attempts to provide women with an institutional (but separate) equality, there still persists the same notion that women are not on the same standing as men.

One of the best places to start when examining this issue is the numerary assistants. These are women who have devoted their whole lives to Opus Dei and often to carrying out the domestic care duties associated with running one of the organization's centers. Cooking, cleaning, handling the laundry – the women's position within the organization seems to tally with the traditional patriarchal view of the housewife. In creating the position, the founders of Opus Dei seem to have transplanted the inherent inequality of 1930s Spain society and institutionalized it. The result was an official position of women in which they were tasked with domestic chores. While the rest of Western society seems to have moved forward with regards to women's place in the "domestic sphere," Opus Dei has not.

However, this role is not one given to all women in Opus Dei. Of the 47,000 female members, only 4,000 are actually numerary assistants. The vast majority are actually supernumeraries, meaning that they will likely enjoy a life outside of the Opus Dei centers. This might mean that they are lawyers, doctors, or possibly even homemakers for their own families. But often these members are among the least visible. As is the case with mortification, it's the minority within the organization who seem to garner the most attention. Perhaps that is because many people not involved with Opus Dei would be shocked to discover that the organization proudly enjoys an entire class of membership (exclusively female) whose job seems to be entirely involving domestic service.

But that's not the end of the criticism. Those who are unimpressed by Opus Dei have commented on the fact that the recruitment of numerary assistants seems to draw exclusively from society's poorer classes. In doing so, these underprivileged women are told that such a role is the vocation given to them by God and that they should relinquish any ideas of marriage and

children. Instead, they should focus on serving Opus Dei (and thus serving God). Once they have been recruited, these women often work incredibly long hours. Accordingly, the critics suggest that Opus Dei is taking advantage of these women, using religion almost as a force of cheap, patriarchy-approved labor.

Of course, such a summation often dismisses the wishes of the women who possess an honest dedication to Opus Dei and view their work as a numerary assistant as a form of devotion. To these people, it is an honor to work in the Opus Dei centers. But such an honor is one that is available only to women, bequeathed upon them by a male-orientated order. In line with Escriva's original visions, the role of the numerary assistants is one that is an archaic relic of Opus Dei's moment of creation, one out of place in the modern world.

Another familiar Opus Dei argument in favor of the status quo is that the arrangement plays on natural predilections. To Opus Dei, it seems only natural that women enjoy an "instinctive aptitude" for domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning. Furthermore, it is an aptitude that the majority of men do not possess. The argument is just as antiquated as the arrangement itself, though it seems to be one that is routinely made. The position of the numerary assistants does not seem to be going anywhere. As Opus Dei becomes more famous for embodying the traditional conservatism of the Catholic Church, such positions are part and parcel of their success. To them, the notion of a male numerary assistant is absurd. There exists – at all times – a reluctance to change any part of the organization from the blueprint which was laid down by Escriva himself. As society moves further and further forwards, Opus Dei is increasingly left behind.

But as well as the numerary assistants, the desire to keep both genders separate for as long as possible permeates much of the Opus Dei structure. As much as possible, the organization hopes to keep men and women separate. There are separate centers (where possible) for men and women, with even shared buildings having separate entrances. During events, there is separation. During retreats, there is separation. Schools are not only

exclusive to male or female students, but the faculty is also divided along gender lines. The desire to keep men and women separate is near constant.

There are many stories about the lengths that church members go to in order to avoid interaction between men and women. We've mentioned a tendency to put everything in writing when communicating between male and female branches of the organization, but many members and ex-members have personal stories about how extreme this notion can be. One story tells of how an IT technician was told by Opus Dei members that there should be two separate phone lines installed in the building, as well as separate computer systems. Even though it was set to cost twice as much to install a computer and phone system for each gender, Opus Dei were happy to commission the work.

To those outside of the confines of Opus Dei, this separation seems somewhat bizarre but mostly harmless. Catholics, even traditionally inclined Catholics, have noted their amusement at Opus Dei's stance on separation. As per usual, the organization defends its actions by citing Escriva, not wanting to alter the structure as the founder saw it. A reluctance to modernize, in this instance, has drawn criticism from feminist organizations as well as secular groups. But when it comes to separation, the reaction to Opus Dei is typically one of pity and confusion rather than revulsion. It is widely accepted outside of the organization that Opus Dei possesses an inherent issue with women. Occasionally, this is acknowledged and excused by Opus Dei itself, but it seems unlikely to be an issue that they are likely to address in the near future. Until then, the role of the numerary assistants and the extent of the gender separation is likely to remain evidence of the systemic, institutional misogyny that exists within Opus Dei.

Follow the Money

In criminal investigations, there is an old mantra that is repeated like gospel. If you want to find out who is pulling the strings, follow the money. For Opus Dei and those investigating the organization's strange place

within the religious landscape, this mantra is particularly telling. Despite their relatively small size and membership numbers, Opus Dei is renowned for its somewhat astonishing financial muscle. To say it punches above its weight in financial terms would be an understatement. So, following the old police saying, if we want to find out why Opus Dei seems to be both controversial and important, then we should follow the money. The only problem is, tracing the organization's funding can be incredibly tough.

There have been rumors since the 1960s that Opus Dei has long been a "major player" in the market for Eurodollars. This is only a small part of the back story concerning Opus Dei and their finances, but it forms a good starting point. Why would a nominally conservative Catholic denomination be speculating on currency markets? One investigator – Canadian journalist Robert Hutchinson – wrote a book on the matter. He could recall being perplexed by the appearance that Opus Dei had a greater value of assets than General Motors. Whenever Opus Dei is confronted with the suggestion that it might be dabbling in such financial markets, Hutchinson reports a constant stream of shrugged shoulders and bewildered denials. For the Canadian, this was enough to prompt comparisons between the modern Opus Dei and the Crusader-era Knights Templar, a Catholic organization that had one of the first international banking organizations in the world.

However, much of Hutchinson's work is speculation. His investigations have yet to uncover the single piece of evidence that ties together the entire picture of Opus Dei's finances, leaving him to speculate on the values and nature of the organization's portfolio. His writing, though, reflects a widespread belief. Even at the most liberal end of the estimation spectrum, Opus Dei's holdings have been said to total $2.8 billion. While only a fraction of General Motors annual revenues, it's still leaps and bounds beyond what many would expect for a religious group less than a million people strong.

There has been a noted decision within the Catholic Church during the 20th Century to ally themselves with the poor and disenfranchised. Since the convening of Vatican II and the creation of the "Gaudium et Spes" document, the Church has tried to actively distance itself from its lavish,

rich past. Thus, once again, Opus Dei is more indicative of the more traditional qualities of the Church. In this case, it would be the extreme wealth concentrated in a relatively small group.

It's an issue that serves to highlight the difference in how Opus Dei perceives itself and how it is perceived by the outside world. If you believe spokespeople for it, then Opus Dei has no desire to become a financial heavyweight and would much rather own as little as possible. This, they say, would detach them from Earthly wealth. But does this hold up to scrutiny?

In Rome, Opus Dei owns and operates their central offices, split into men and women's sections. The annual operating budget for the buildings is $2.7 million. This might pale in comparison to the $260 million needed to run the Vatican each year, but then Opus Dei's offices are not a global tourist destination, nor do they house some of the greatest works of art created by a person, nor do the administrators have to cater to a billion plus people around the world.

Opus Dei's headquarters might seem like an expensive outlay, but they do not own all of their property around the world. Sometimes they lease, sometimes they rent. Sometimes, the buildings are owned by local churches or shell companies. In a similar sense, the organization's more secular endeavors – the schools, universities, and other enterprises – are often owned and attributed to lay people. These are members of Opus Dei, and the enterprises are operated as Opus Dei officially sanctioned endeavors, but they are not technically owned by it. While Opus Dei insists that this allows them to remain secular and independent from the vast wealth needed to run such matters, critics have suggested that such practices simply allow Opus Dei to hide the true extent of their assets.

There has long been a dispute about the purview of Opus Dei. The organization itself maintains that any business ventures owned and operated by its members will be entirely their own enterprises. Opus Dei might provide a spiritual guidance or doctrine that helps guide members through the world of business, but the organization will remain separate at all times.

This is an idea that has been outright dismissed by critics such as Michael Walsh. Walsh suggests that distinguishing between members' businesses and Opus Dei's own is useless, listing a number of reasons.

First, he claims, all profits made by numeraries' businesses will accrue to Opus Dei anyway. Even supernumeraries who own businesses are often pressured into giving up most of their profits. Second, Walsh believes that every major business decision taken by an Opus Dei member will be discussed at length with the director of their local center before starting. The communication channels are totally open, and the organization always knows what its members are doing. These are accusations that Opus Dei denies.

Due to the insistence on secularity in Opus Dei, getting even the most basic financial information from the organization is sometimes almost impossible. There has been a suggestion from within it that the secular reasoning is not the only one for Opus Dei putting its businesses in members' hands. Without creating a central "pool" of Opus Dei funds, there is nothing that could be mismanaged or misused. Doing so limits Opus Dei's exposure to potential trouble. Spreading the organization's supposed wealth across a large body of trusted individuals is a form of protectionism, from both financial misappropriation and investigative critics.

Part of the reason as to why people struggle to believe Opus Dei's claims of dedication to poverty lies in the properties they use. Centers can be found in wealthy, upscale neighborhoods, and it's not uncommon for such buildings to be lavishly decorated. Even if those inside might be taking cold showers and sleeping on the floor, the outward appearance – the customer-facing part – of Opus Dei is resolutely wealthy. Though it might counter with claims that not all centers are in wealthy neighborhoods or that the centers themselves are actually owned by a member, it's difficult to satisfactorily explain why it seems to have such untold resources at its disposal.

There seems little doubt that Opus Dei is a wealthy organization. The group contains members who control businesses worth a huge amount while still fundraising and collecting revenue themselves. It's an organization who has

its own multimillion-dollar investment portfolio, as well as assets scattered around the world. We know that there is a huge amount of money involved, but tracking it down can be difficult. Opus Dei is very careful about limiting their exposure. As such, we should begin to look at the ways in which their wealth is transferred into influence. Through a variety of means, Opus Dei has risen up as one of the major players in the world of Catholicism and religion as a whole. While we might never be able to follow the money directly to the source, we can track down the places where that money is most influential.

The Church and the Government

Throughout this book, we have examined the differences of Opus Dei when compared to the traditional Catholic Church. To pretend that they are distant relations would be a lie. Opus Dei and the Vatican have always been close. In this section, we will explore their relationship.

The majority of this section will focus on recent history. We should start by establishing a few facts. First, during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II, no other group seemed to be as approved by the Church as Opus Dei. It was during this time that it became a papal prelature, and a short time later, Escriva was made a saint. Second, Opus Dei officials have been instrumental in shaping recent Vatican doctrine. In 2001, for example, a well-known Opus Dei priest was among those behind "Dominus Iesus," a document that described the "gravely deficient" situation other religions found themselves in with respect to Christianity. Third, reports in 2004 highlighted the controversy in comments that were attributed to Pope John Paul II. Upon seeing the film the *Passion of the Christ*, the then-Pope is reported to have said, "It is as it was," a major endorsement. The controversy stems from both whether this was actually said and the fact that the film's assistant director is not only an Opus Dei member, but was also personally baptized by Pope John Paul II when he was still the Bishop of Rome. These incidents, along with many others, amount to give an idea of the amount of power and influence Opus Dei enjoys within the walls of Vatican City.

Taking a broader look at the picture, and connections begin to emerge. It's possible to draw links between Opus Dei, the Vatican, and any number of conservative political causes. In the majority of incidents concerning the Church, it's not uncommon to find that Opus Dei members are at the core of the side closest linked to traditional, conservative beliefs. Any time the Church veers in this direction, it's easy to see why people believe this is Opus Dei's influence shining through.

There are even rumors that have persisted around Vatican City that Opus Dei is mounting a plan to take over many internal Vatican organizations, including the Vatican Radio broadcast service. Currently, the radio station costs a great deal of money to broadcast to hundreds of millions of people every day. Opus Dei could swoop in as a financial backer and take on the costs itself, in exchange for a tighter control over the content that is broadcast. There are similar rumors about taking over Vatican-backed universities and schools. Opus Dei has already enacted a similar plan by taking over convents and seminaries that need financial help. All of the rumors are denied by Opus Dei, but they will not seem to go away.

Though he is now deceased, the bond between Opus Dei and Pope John Paul II is seen by many as having been the launching pad for much of Opus Dei's recent success. The personal prelature is the most famous example of this relationship and drove many English-language press outlets to investigate further. John Paul II spoke officially on Opus Dei a number of times, always positively. He seemed to approve of much of the organization's work and was an admirer of Escriva. It's a close relationship that continued after the death of one Pope and into the reign of the next. Though it might be too early to discern the current Pope's relationship with Opus Dei, we can be confident that little happens within the Church without the organization's approval.

Having existed for close to two millennia, it's no surprise to learn that there are multiple cliques and groups within the wider Catholic Church. Whenever a new cardinal is elected, it's common for priests in Rome to ask

about his parish. They don't mean the area he administers, but rather which friends he has within the Vatican. Opus Dei is one of the growing groups.

Looking at it from afar, Opus Dei involvement seems to be limited. Officially, there are less than ten high-ranking Vatican officials who are Opus Dei members. At the time of writing, there are two cardinals and twenty bishops who are officially Opus Dei members. But it is impossible to quantify those who are sympathetic to the Opus Dei cause or consider themselves traditionalists in some degree. With Opus Dei being thought to represent the best of the latter, conservative movements within the Church are often associated with Opus Dei to some degree. For example, there are a further fourteen bishops who are members of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross. If you'd like to know more about who has connections and sympathies to Opus Dei, then a quick flick through the *Annuario* (the annual Vatican yearbook) is often enough. Again and again, the entire suggestion seems to revert back to the idea of the White Masonry.

The personal prelature, the canonization of Opus Dei's founder, the presence of Opus Dei cardinals and bishops, and the personal relationship between the organization and the last few Popes certainly points towards Opus Dei possessing a special privilege in the Catholic Church. Indeed, the process of making Escriva a saint was considered especially quick, with just twenty-seven years passing between his death and his canonization. As a point of comparison, it took Joan of Arc around six hundred years to achieve the same. The cost of turning Escriva into a saint cost more than a million dollars, and not everyone within the Catholic Church approved of the canonization, with some voices concerned that critical witnesses to the process were not heard. In some cases, it has been said that Opus Dei's influence and power ensured the process was completed, making their founder into a saint.

Turning Escriva into a saint is not just an example of how Opus Dei managed to wield its influence. Such a move was important, as it provided Opus Dei with something like a divine blessing. Having its founder be a saint conferred on Opus Dei a huge amount of respect and power within the Catholic Church. The name of Escriva was transformed, changing from the

founder of a strange denomination into a one of the Catholic Church's most respected individuals. He is now not only venerated within the Church, but also the Opus Dei founder's name is now a means to an end. With many members happy to pursue a more conservative agenda, the backing of a saint means that Opus Dei could have a big say in the policy of the Catholic Church moving forwards.

By this point, the influence of Opus Dei within the Vatican seems almost confirmed. For an organization of their size, at least, they punch well above their weight. Less than a hundred years old, wielding a large amount of financial muscle, and with the backing of Saint Escriva, they have risen into an unlikely position of influence. When compared to the Jesuits (often labelled as their traditional rivals), one might think that Opus Dei has done exceptionally well to rise to power so quickly. But this section has dwelled on what happens within the Church. What happens when Opus Dei tries to influence the secular world?

Opus Dei has a long history of involvement in conservative politics. It has been a criticism made by many that it has chosen to ally itself with a number of controversial regimes. We've already discussed how Opus Dei has come to resemble the traditionalist, conservative line in Church matters, but this also seems true of its secular activities, even though the organization might deny that there is a cohesive, driven, political effort. But there's a famous saying within the organization, often attributed to Escriva, that says that "Opus Dei does not act; its members do." Even if the founder was against a single political party, even if members are supposedly independent, there is no denying the influence Opus Dei has had on the world's political stage.

In recent years, for example, Opus Dei has had strong ties with American politicians and one-time Presidential front-runner, Rick Santorum. In the organization's native Spain, Opus Dei members have recently been minister of defense, a national police chief, and a leading financial official. Peruvian congressmen have been Opus Dei members. Italy has had Opus Dei members of parliament. Poland has had leading politicians who have been Opus Dei members. In Chile, it was the mayor of the capital city and the

leader of one of the biggest political parties. The two things that they all had in common were Opus Dei membership and a lean towards the conservative side of the spectrum.

One of the best examples of Opus Dei's controversial dalliance with politics is perhaps a result of Escriva's insistence that his Church remain free from such matters. At the end of Spain's fascist era, the Vatican was behind the decision to form a Christian Democratic Party. Escriva outright refused to take part. This has led some people to label him as a fascist sympathizer. To others, the reality was that Escriva both wished to remain isolated from politics and wanted to focus on his mission to have Opus Dei declared a personal prelature. What is true, however, is that the death of Escriva has seen a relaxation in the organization's tendency to take political sides.

As mentioned previously, there is little doubt that Opus Dei's politics lean to the right. This is true both within the church and within secular communities. Their stance on political stalwarts such as gay marriage, abortion, and other right wing viewpoints leaves little doubt on where they stand in a current political climate. This is likely a result of the organization steadfastly refusing to modernize, clinging to the views Escriva imposed on it since the early days. As time passes, Opus Dei is closer towards the far right than ever before. As more and more people begin to see Opus Dei as the religious defendant of many right wing issues, its support will only grow. Even if people do not become members themselves, those of a conservative alignment will offer their support and their backing to an organization that they believe is standing up for the views they share. In that alone, Opus Dei is becoming essentially a political entity. Such an issue leads us neatly into the last section in this guide, in which we hope to answer the question of whether Opus Dei can be accused of being a cult.

Is Opus Dei a Cult?

Most of this book has been leading up to this one question. For many people, hearing about Opus Dei and its sometimes shocking practices can immediately prompt comparisons with other cults. Certainly, listening to

ex-members of Opus Dei, there are many stories of cult-like behavior. But the truth is not quite so clear cut.

One of the biggest differences between Opus Dei and the majority of cults is tradition. Looking at most of the Christian-centric cults, most will prompt a turn away from tradition and a move towards new ideas. Opus Dei rigidly clings to traditional beliefs, but it differs from traditional Catholicism. Often, the organization can be said to compromise the freedom of conscience its members possess. Criticisms include allegations of mind control, of breaking apart families, of making it difficult to leave the organization, and that the very existence of Opus Dei harms the Catholic Church.

A key difference between Opus Dei and most cults is the backing it receives from the Vatican. Most cults will be offshoots of organized religion, very rarely operating in tandem with the typical believers. But that does not mean that Opus Dei does not achieve the same results. The allegations of mind control often concern pluralism, of the tendency of all Opus Dei members to eventually sound and appear the same. Once cut off inside the centers, people are said to become like “clones.” Combine this with the mortification and the religious devotion, and it’s easy to see why the cult comparison is made.

Reports from ex-members describe an unexpected change in conditions once they become members. We mentioned earlier how many of the more extreme mortification tools came as a surprise to numeraries who had just whistled, but even the conditions in the centers themselves are often not adequately explained until it is too late. Even if the Opus Dei centers appear lavish, they often mask harsh living conditions. Many ex-members have said that, if the entirety of their experience had been adequately laid out to them, they would not have joined.

Another cult-like practice involves confession. Members are encouraged to admit their sins in confession, a practice that has fallen out of favor in mainstream Catholicism. Once they have done so, the priests and Opus Dei members’ advise methods of atonement. Psychologically, it can make

people dependent on the practice as they look to quell the guilt that the religion induces in them. Furthermore, they are often encouraged to admit their failings in front of a group, something that can be an emotionally harrowing experience. Add in the monitoring of all mail that passes into the center, the limited amount of financial freedom given to members, and a limit on access to all forms of media, and it's easy to see how people get stuck inside the cultish bubble.

In fact, the confession process has been labelled one of the Opus Dei's most troubling practices. Unlike traditional Catholicism, priests are encouraged to keep track of their subject's confessions. In Scientology, this practice has been heavily criticized, with the unmentioned threat that secrets will be released to the public should a person decide to leave the religion. Though this is yet to happen in any large scale with regards to Opus Dei, the implication is certainly present. The organization argues that this is not policy, and that it cannot be found anywhere in the statutes. While this is true, the proliferation of such a practice means that it happens anyway.

Another big issue is money. Numeraries can often contribute up to 22% of their salary to Opus Dei. This includes food, shelter, clothing, and the right to stay in a center. But it also includes donations to the organization and payments for courses and events throughout the year as well as spiritual guidance. It leaves them with little money to spend living anywhere other than a center and often means that they have little in the way of savings. Not only does this make leaving Opus Dei more difficult, but it also means that – come retirement – the numerary is dependent on Opus Dei for assistance.

Perhaps the hallmark of a cult can be how difficult it can be to leave. In Opus Dei, however, there is a relatively large departure rate among those who whistle and then choose not to stay on, estimated at being between 20 and 30 percent, though this number drops significantly as the member progresses deeper into Opus Dei. Leaving is difficult, though. If a member is having doubts, they are warned that departing would be an offence against God. It's a heavy sin to leave the organization, which is especially problematic if those joining are likely to be among the most religious. As

well as that, former members have listed constant phone calls, personal visits to the work place and the home, and a flood of letters asking the person to return to Opus Dei. Even allegations of professional sabotage and harassment have been made. For those who have friends only inside the organization, members are encouraged to sever all ties and thus induce a "social death" in the person hoping to leave.

Reports of broken spirits, severed connections, shattered families, and emotional discombobulation for those who try to leave Opus Dei certainly tie in with the issues faced by many people who try to leave cults. The response from the organization itself, however, is that leaving can be incredibly simple. Indeed, before the fidelity stage (i.e. when a person pledges their life to the group), all they have to do to leave is not renew their contract. Opus Dei keeps a register of ex-members who remain on good terms, whose accounts are used to counter balance the negative stories.

It remains difficult to say whether or not Opus Dei is a cult. There is often fine a line between the practices of mainstream religion and niche cults. It is this fine line that Opus Dei often walks down. On some occasions, it leans heavily to one side, while on other occasions, it leans heavily to the other. But it seems to possess the ability to right itself and remain upright at all times. Due to the way in which Opus Dei is now integrated into the Catholic Church, there will often be a backlash against those who attempt to label them as a cult. However, it is certainly more extreme than most mainstream religions. Perhaps it is best to recognize that Opus Dei is unique. This does not make what it does necessarily permissible, nor does it make it evil. But it is important to remain aware of the organization's true nature.

Conclusion

Trying to figure out Opus Dei is an ongoing problem for many people. The organization has gone from strength to strength in a relatively short amount of time, creating a distinct new brand of Catholicism while it does so. In an age when the Church has made a concerted effort to modernize and focus on the poor and disenfranchised, Opus Dei often feels like a throwback to a different era. Its members are conservative, traditional, and possess utter conviction in their beliefs.

Perhaps this is why so many people are so keen to label Opus Dei as a cult. It's no question that its recruiting tactics, its financial strength, and its mortification practices seems completely out of place in our modern society. But you don't have to travel back too far to find a time when this was simply the normal practice for the Catholic Church. That is Opus Dei's greatest strength and its greatest weakness.

Opus Dei reminds us of the cult-like devotion inspired by the world's most popular religion, reminding us of the many centuries when the Church was not quite so sympathetic to the cause of the less fortunate. While this might worry those who do not appreciate the history of Catholicism, there are those who are glad that such a body still exists. Until such time that we're able to resolve this conflict, Opus Dei will not only get more popular, but it will come under increased scrutiny. However, as long as we know the history and the truth about it, we should be in a good place to react to its development.

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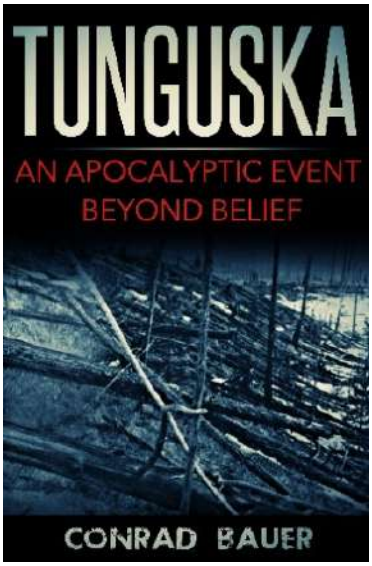

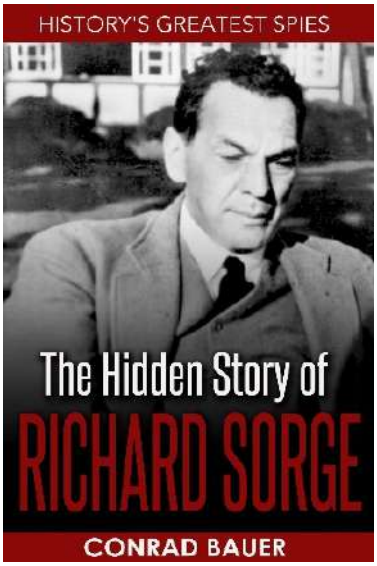

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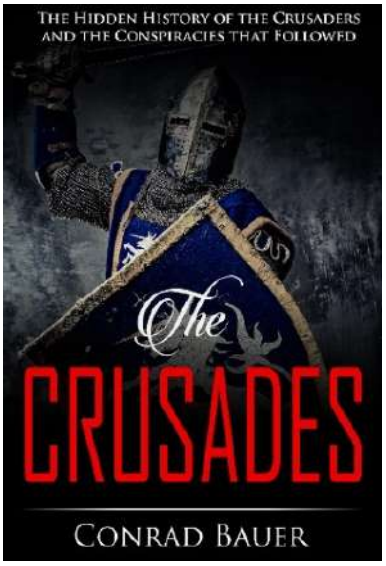
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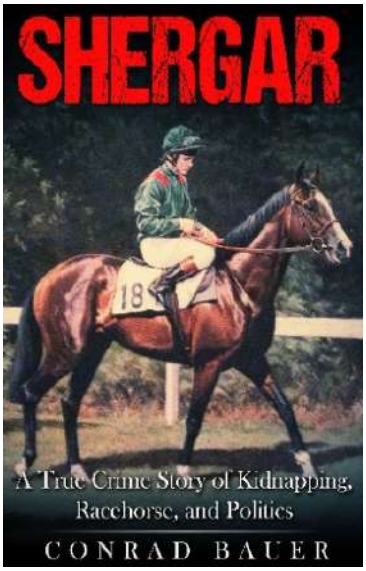
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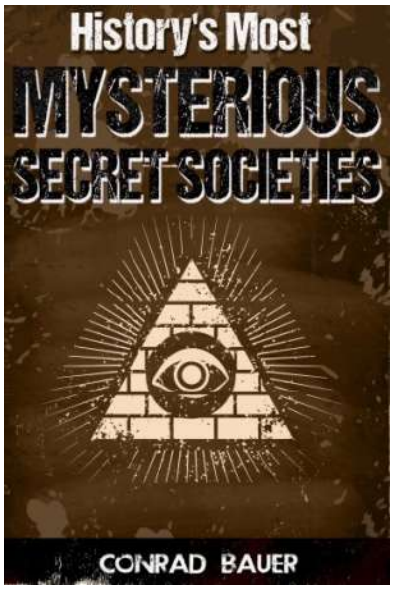
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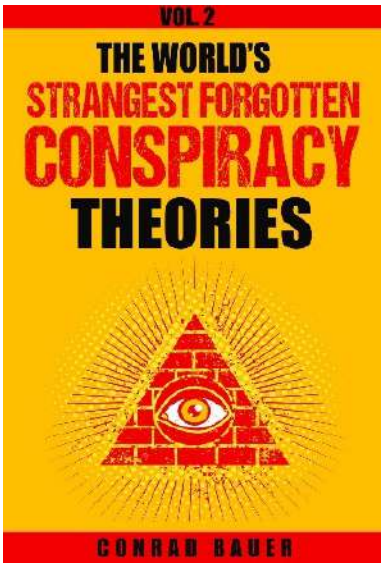
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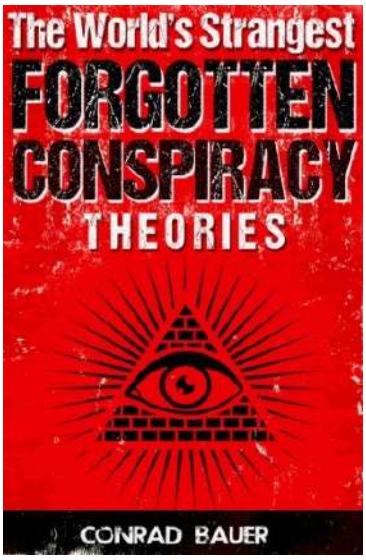
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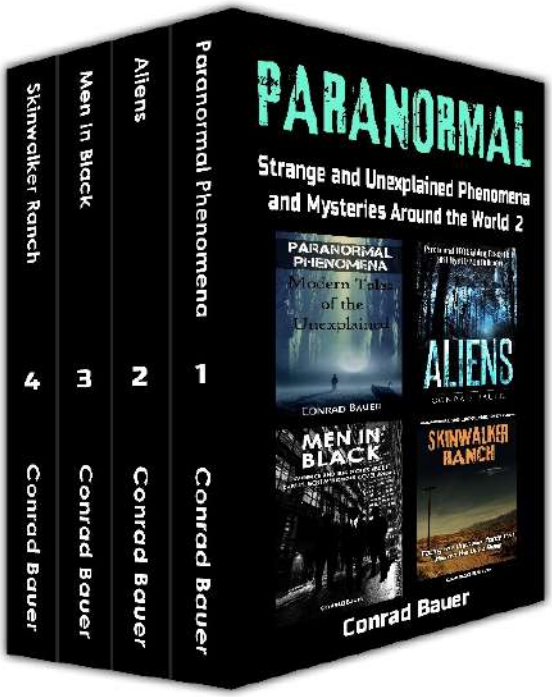
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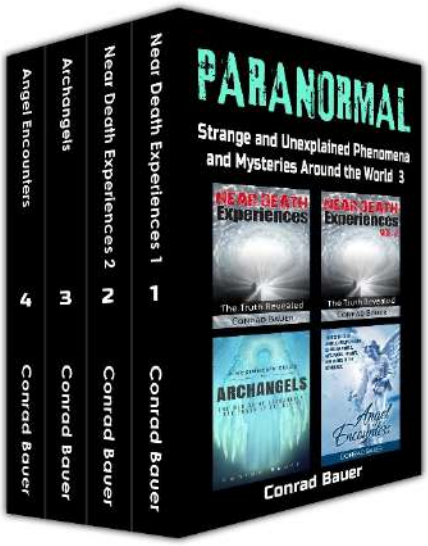

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